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ZENOBIA IS CARRIED OFF

I was present when the "winged shape out of nightmare", as the Nemedian Chronicles call it, appeared suddenly over the park at Tarantia, and swooped down upon Conan's Queen and carried her off in its arms before any of us quite understood what was happening.

I say *it*, because there was no way of telling, then or later, what Hell had spawned this strange and evil bird-thing which struck at us from the sky. It did not search. It did not waver in irresolution. Like the hawk so dearly loved by our nobles, it struck true and straight—as if instructed—at the woman our King loved.

One moment Queen Zenobia, incredibly beautiful daughter of the old King of Aquilonia, walked there on the balcony, talking gaily with those of us who thronged around her hoping for the slightest glance of approval, flushing with pride whenever she would place one soft hand on our shoulder and tell us how much she, and "My Lord", appreciated our services.

And still we failed her.

As the Gods would have it, Conan was not there when it happened. Had he been there no Thing from Hell would have triumphed, that was certain. But an unlucky chance had taken him outside the palace grounds. There was to be a Feast that evening to celebrate the year of peace since the discovery of the Great Conspiracy.

Suddenly the Sun seemed to cloud over and a chill of doom fell upon us. The trees moaned like lost souls lamenting their fate in the outer darkness. The very air suddenly had an evil feel to it.

Someone cried out, a short terror-stricken shout. One moment there was a black dot in the sky. The next moment it was larger and still larger. At first it looked like a bird or a bat, but soon we saw its frightful shape, manlike but winged. Some of the archers attempted to aim at it. They could not move, and watched helpless as it swooped down on us, straight and true, with a rush of vast leathery wings, its strangely evil eyes gleaming.

And suddenly the sun was shining again.

We stirred, as if an enchantment had been lifted from us, and milled around, shouting our grief. Finally someone thought to send a messenger to Conan, but Zenobia was gone by then, carried off by this Thing that had flown out of the sky and then returned into nothingness. And Conan, our King, was once more alone.

PERDICCAS

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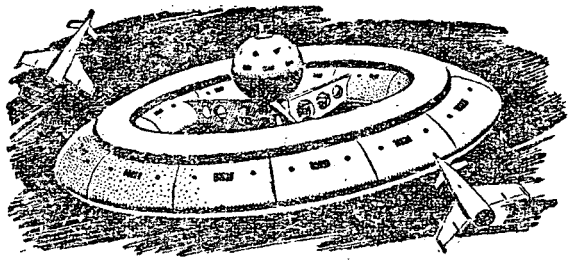

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conan the victorious

by BJORN NYBERG
and
L. SPRAGUE de CAMP

This was the first time he had met this man whom he'd fought as war-chief of the Zuagirs and pirate admiral.

—"Know furthermore, O Prince, that Conan the barbarian thus won at last to great fame and high estate as king of Aquilonia, the starry gem of the green West with its gallant nobles, sturdy warriors, intrepid frontiersmen, and beauteous damsels. But dark and terrible forces were at work to rock his throne and wreck his fortune. For, on the night of the feast at Tarantia to celebrate the year of peace that followed the overthrow of the conspiracy of Valerius, Tarascus, and Amalric, and the destruction of the wizard Xaltotun, Conan's lately-wedded queen Zenobia was snatched from the balcony of the palace by a winged shape out of nightmare and borne off eastward. Thinking it better to travel swiftly, anonymously, and alone than to take an army with him, Conan set out in search of his stolen mate..."

The Nemedian Chronicles.

1. THE RING OF RAKHAMON.

THE SCORCHING afternoon sun cast searing rays

The late Robert E. Howard is best remembered for his novels and stories about the incredible Conan the Cimmerian, that fantastic adventurer who storms out of the pages of a mythical pre-history, slashing, loving, conquering. Swedish Air Force officer Bjorn Nyberg and L. Sprague de Camp continue the story of Conan here, a Conan fighting against fantastic odds.

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over the desert like whiplashes of white fire. Distant groves of palm-trees shimmered; flocks of vultures hung like clumps of ripe black grapes in the foliage.

A solitary rider halted his horse in the shade of the palm-fronds that fringed an oasis. Though he wore the snowy *khalat* of the desert-dwellers, his features belied any thought of Eastern origin. The hand that shaded his questing eyes was broad and powerful and ridged with scars. His skin was browned, not with the native duskyness of the Zuagir, but with the ruddy bronze of the sunbaked Westerner. The eyes were a volcanic blue, like twin pools of unplumbable depth. A glint at his sleeve betrayed the fact that the traveler wore a coat of mail under his flowing dress. At his side hung a long straight sword in a plain leather scabbard.

Conan had ridden far and fast. Plunging across country with reckless speed, he had broken four horses on his way to Koth. Having reached the expanses of desert that formed the eastern end of the Kothian kingdom, he had paused to buy a khalat and some bread and meat at a dingy, dirty-white border village. Nobody had barred his way, though many an unkempt head was thrust through a door in wonder at the speed of this lonely rider.

Conan's sharp eyes swept the horizon. In the shimmering distance he detected the faint outlines of domed buildings and towering walls. This, then, would be the town of Khanyria in the kingdom of Khoraja. Here he would seek the help of Pelias the sorcerer in recovering his stolen queen. Five years before, he had met and befriended Pelias when the Kothian wizard lay imprisoned in the vaults of the scarlet citadel of his foe Tsotha-lanti.

Conan spurred the black stallion towards the distant towers. "Crom!" he muttered. "I hope Pelias is in his full senses. Like as not he's lying drunk on his golden divan, dead to the world. But, by Badb, I'll wake him!"

In the narrow streets and cobbled market-place of Khanyria, a motley throng swirled and eddied. Zuagirs from the desert villages to the northeast, swaggering mercenaries with roving eyes and hands on hilts, hawkers crying their wares, harlots in red kirtles and painted faces milled together in a flamboyant tableau. Now and then the crowd was driven by the armored retainers of a wealthy noble, his perfumed sedan-chair bobbing on the shoulders of ebon-skinned, oxmusked Kushite slaves.

Crassides, the burly captain of the guard at the Western Gate, stroked his graying beard and muttered. Strang-

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ers often passed into the city, but seldom such curious strangers as today's arrivals. Early this afternoon, in a cloud of dust stirred up from the desert sands, had come a troop of seven. The rider in the lead was a lean fellow of vulture-look, his narrow mustache framing a thin line of mouth. He was armed like a Western knight, though his cuirass and helm were plain, without any device. By his side rode a huge Stygian on a black horse. A khalat enshrouded the Stygian's form, and his only visible weapon was a massive war-bow.

The other five were all well armored, wearing serviceable swords and daggers at their sides and holding lances in their hands.

It was not the custom of the Khanyrian city guard to stop strangers without good reason, for here East and West met to mingle, haggle, and trade tall tales. Nevertheless, Crassides cast a searching glance at the seven as they jingled away towards the northern quarter. They disappeared into the profusion of smoky taverns with mongrels yapping about their horses' hooves.

The rest of the day passed quietly, but now it seemed that the trickle of odd strangers must go on. As the sun flung its last rays across the darkening heavens, a tall, burnoosed foreigner reined in before the closed gate and demanded entrance loudly.

Crassides, called to the gate by one of the guards on duty, arrived just as the remaining guard shouted down: "What seek you here, rogue? We let no outlanders in at night to cut our throats and debauch our women! State your name and errand before I clap you in irons!"

The stranger's glowing eyes, half hidden beneath his kaffia, regarded the trooper icily. "My friend," said the stranger in a barbarous accent, "for words less than those I have slit a hundred gullets. Let me in or, by Crom, I'll raise a horde to sack this bunch of hovels!"

"Not so fast!" said Crassides, thrusting the guard aside. "Get down, you young fool, and I'll teach you how to speak to strangers later. Now, you, sir!" He spoke to the horseman. "We want no quarrels in Khanyria, and as you see the gate is closed for the night. Ere we open it, you must account for yourself."

"Call me Arus," growled the stranger. "I seek Pelias the sorcerer."

"Let him in," said Crassides. The heavy bolts were drawn. Two watchmen strained at the bronze handles, and one of the door-valves swung slowly open. The stranger cantered through, not even glancing at those around the gate. He headed for the northern district, and the click of his horse's hooves

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dwindled in the distance.

The discomfited young guard spoke to his captain with restrained heat: "Why do we let this insolent lout ride in as if he were lord of the city? Why not put a shaft through his ribs?"

Crassides smiled through his beard. "Years may teach you wisdom, though I doubt it. Have you never heard how, years ago, a northern barbarian like this one was captured by the warlord of one of the little city-states of Shem to the south? And how he escaped, rounded up a band of outlaw Zuagirs, and came back for vengeance? And how the savage horde stormed the city, putting the people to the sword, flaying captives in the public square, and burning everything except the pole on which the warlord's head was stuck? This fellow might be one of that sort.

"But alone he can do us little harm. And if he means us ill, Pelias will know it by his arcane arts and take measures. Now do you begin to see?"

Conan knew that Pelias lurked in a tower of yellow stone at the northern end of the city. He planned to visit the wizard first and later to seek board and lodging. Anything would do. His body and tastes had not been softened by his years of civilized life. A loaf of bread, a hunk of meat, and a jack of foaming ale were all he wanted. For sleep, why, he could use the floor of a tavern if all else failed.

There came a muffled oath and a cry of fear. A door to the right flew open, and a young girl flung herself into the street.

Conan reined in. The girl was shaped like one of the *mekhrani* that people the pleasure-houses in the paradise of Erlik's true believers. This Conan could readily see, for her simple dress was torn to tatters, leaving her white rounded thighs but scantily covered. Brushing back the jet-black tangle of hair from her face, she cast a terrified glance towards the door, which had closed behind her. Then her large eyes turned to Conan, sitting his horse like a statue. Her hand flew to her mouth in terror.

"Now, lass, what's eating you?" spoke the Cimmerian roughly, bending forward. "Is your lover cross with you, or what?"

The girl rose with a lithe motion. "Two drunken soldiers tried to molest me. I came to buy wine for my father. They took my money, too!"

Conan's eyes flashed as he jumped to the ground. His barbaric code of chivalry made him hate a man's inflicting wanton brutality on a woman.

"Steady, lass. We'll pull their beards yet. Just open

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the door. Are they the only guests?"

Nodding in terrified confirmation, she led him to the tavern. After a moment's hesitation she opened the door. In two long strides Conan was inside. The door clicked shut behind him.

But no such scene as he had expected confronted him. Here were no drunken soldiers to be quieted by a couple of buffets. Seven alert armed men ranged the walls, swords and daggers gleaming in their hands. The determination to kill was in their eyes as they instantly rushed upon Conan.

A civilized man would have been stunned by surprise one second and cut down in the next, but not the giant Cimmerian. His keen primitive instincts gave him a flash of warning as he crossed the threshhold, and his lightning reflexes went instantly into action. No time now to draw the great sword; before he had it out, they would be upon him like a pack of wolves. His only chance lay in instant attack, surprising his attackers by its very boldness before they could ring him and close with him.

A mighty kick sent a bench whirling against the legs of three of his adversaries as they rushed forward. They fell in a clattering, cursing tangle. Conan ducked a whistling sword-stroke of one of the other four and smashed his right fist into the man's face before the latter could recover his balance. Conan felt the man's bones crack under the blow, which cast him back against his advancing comrades.

Taking advantage of the confusion, the Cimmerian burst clean through the ring of foes, wheeled with the speed of a panther, grabbed a heavy oaken table and, with a muscle-wrenching heave, hurled it into the faces of his enemies. Weapons clattered to the floor and oaths and cries of pain rent the air. The lull in the fight gave Conan time to rip the great sword from its sheath and snatch out his dagger with his left hand.

He did not wait for a renewed attack. His barbarian blood was roused by this treacherous ambush. Rushing in to attack, single-handed against the six who were still in action, Conan with a furious kick caved in the ribs of one rascal still on hands and knees. As he parried a thrust with his dagger, a savage swipe of his heavy sword sheared off the sword-arm of another. Arm and sword fell to the floor, and the man crumpled up, glassy-eyed and screaming, with blood spurting.

That left four, advancing warily in a half-circle. The tall wolfish leader feinted at Conan's legs but almost lost his head to the Cimmerian's whistling counter-cut. He escaped by throwing himself to the floor. Just before he did so, Conan recognized the man

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as Baraccus, an Aquilonian noble he had exiled for plotting with the Ophireans.

At that instant the other three rushed in. One desperate sword-stroke caught Conan on the helmet, denting it and dizzying him. Stars swam before his eyes, but he ripped viciously upward and was rewarded by a hoarse, gurgling scream. A dagger-point broke on the stout links of mail covering his right side, but a sword gashed his left arm.

When he hastily wiped the blood from his face he saw that he faced but one enemy, as the Stygian, his dagger broken, had stepped back to pick up a weapon from the floor. The tall leader was rising from his fall.

Conan stepped forward to close with his foe but his foot slipped in a pool of blood. He fell heavily.

The assassin confronting him shrieked in triumph and rushed forward lifting his sword. Conan's foot lashed out and knocked the man's leg from under him, so that his blow went awry and he fell on top of the Cimmerian, impaling himself on the dagger that Conan thrust up to meet his falling form.

Conan flung the body aside and, with catlike speed, sprang again to his feet to meet the attack of the rearmed Stygian. The dusky giant rushed towards Conan, eyes blazing with dark fires and lips foaming with impassioned hatred. Ducking the swipe of the Cimmerian's sword, he whipped his white cloak around the blade, imprisoning it in the heavy folds. The knife that the Stygian had picked up was driven against Conan's side with such force that mail-links snapped and the point pierced the Cimmerian's body. But Conan ripped into the brown torso with swift and murderous thrusts of his own dirk. The Stygian's mouth flew open in awful pain, his dagger clattered to the floor, and he doubled up and followed it.

Conan tore his sword free from the folds of the Stygian's dress and advanced upon the unwounded leader. "You've forgotten your knightly oaths since I kicked you off your estate, eh, Baraccus?" he snarled. "I should have had your head when I found out your treason, but this time will do as well as any!"

Conan presented a terrible aspect. From beneath his dented helmet, blood flowed down the side of his sweaty face. His right side was red with gore, and a bloody rent showed in his mailshirt. Baraccus, remembering the horrific legends of the Cimmerian's former deeds, lost his nerve and whirled to flee. With a grating laugh, Conan tossed up his sword, caught the hilt reversed, and hurled the weapon like a javelin. The point smashed through the

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back-plate of Baraccus' corselet. Baraccus pitched forward at full length, the sword standing upright in his back and a stream of blood running from his mouth.

Conan relaxed a little, surrounded by enemies dead or unconscious. Then a voice behind him aroused his barbarian senses. He wheeled in a flash.

A fat man stood in the back door wringing his pudgy hands. "Oh, mercy, what has happened to my fine house?" he wailed, his face creased by worry. "Blood all over! Furniture ruined!"

Two strides brought Conan to the taverner, under whose chin he poised the point of his dagger. "You had a hand in this, you yapping dog!" he roared. "They could not have set this ambush without your help."

"Mercy, lord! They threatened to cut my throat otherwise! That would have been almost better than this! They said it would be swift and silent..."

Conan slapped the man's face with such force that the taverner was thrown against the door-jamb. He reeled, and blood ran down his chin from a cut lip.

"Silence!" rumbled Conan, his anger appeased a little. "Be glad I don't flay you an inch at a time!"

"Y-yes, lord!" The man wept in abject terror.

"Now fetch a jack of wine, before I split your head! And of the best! Also some clean cloths to bind up these scratches."

As the terrified taverner hurried off, Conan kicked a corpse out of the way and sank down wearily upon a bench. A thought struck him. Where was the handsome wench who had started all this?

The host returned on trembling legs, holding a flask and a pewter goblet. With an impatient curse, Conan tore the bottle from him and upended it over his parched gullet. When the whole of the contents had poured down without interruption, Conan set down the empty container with a crash, wiped his mouth on his bloody sleeve, and turned his blue eyes upon the man.

"Killing dries a man's throat," he said. "Now tell me: Where is the girl who was here with these men before I entered?"

The fat taverner, green with fear, shook his head. "Noble lord, I never saw her until she came here yesterday, dressed in outlandish garments. She changed her garb in her room on the upper floor. I know not her name or aught else about her."

Conan heaved himself to his feet, only a little troubled by wounds that would have incapacitated an ordinary man for days. Tearing his sword out of Baraccus' body, he

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thundered: "Lead me to her room at once! And should this prove another trap, your soul will rot on the black floors of Hell within the instant!"

Knees knocking, the flabby Khanyrian led the way up the narrow stair. The Cimmerian followed, his eyes scanning every cranny with wolfish wariness. On the upper floor, his guide paused before a door and chose a key from the great bunch at his girdle. He unlocked the door and opened it wide to reassure the edgy barbarian.

Conan decided that there was no chance of another ambush in that narrow room. The only furniture was a bed and a small table. On the bed lay green silks, a golden sash, a turban strip with an emerald pin, and a filmy veil. This was the garb of a Hyrkanian noblewoman, from the great and growing eastern empire of Turan.

Wheeling and retracing his steps, Conan pondered this new enigma with clouded brow.

With nostrils flaring and sword in hand, Conan stepped alertly from the tavern door. His limbs had become a little stiffened from his wounds and his side ached from the dagger-thrust, but he still had vigor enough to spring into the saddle of his waiting horse.

He was mystified by the assault. He well knew that many men of different creeds, races, and stations thirsted for his blood and would have loved to roast his guts over a slow fire. On this mission, however, he had ridden swiftly, silently, and anonymously. Yet armored foes had ambushed him with gleaming blades. Something or someone had brought Baraccus from the West and the Hyrkanian woman from the East together to try to trap him.

Conan shrugged the puzzle from his mind with the fatalistic equanimity of the barbarian. As he could not now grasp the whole picture behind the recent incident, he was content to wait until further information came to light.

He cantered leisurely through the streets with eyes darting into the shadows. His thoughts came back to the beautiful woman who had nearly led him to his death. The sight of her supple limbs had fired his blood, and he meant to take a hot kiss at the very least as a reward for helping her. But now she was gone as if by magic.

Emerging upon a wide, deserted square, Conan, aided by the dim light of the clouded moon, saw the outline of a spired edifice, pointing like a finger to the heavens. In the deepening darkness it gleamed dull yellow like the reflex of a dying sun. This was the tower where Pelias secreted himself from the un-

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desired company of his fellow-men.

A broad expanse of gardens and lawns surrounded the yellow tower. No walls, fences or forbidding gates ringed it. They were not needed. Horrid legends, whispered in the dark of evening, had taught the Khanyrians to keep away from sorcerers' abodes, into which an intruder might enter but from which he would probably never return.

Conan's horse shied at the edge of the lawn, whinnying and stamping. It chewed its bit and blew foam from its lips.

"Crom!" muttered the Cimmerian. "It seems as if Pelias has unholy company. Well, I can walk."

He dismounted and stode up the narrow flagstone walk, his eyes roving and his hand on his hilt. Necromantic rites often drew nameless monstrosities in the night, as the smell of carrion attracts vultures. Conan had met many kinds of beings spawned in other times and planes of existence. Many could be fought and slain only by magical weapons or by incantations read from dusty volumes or pieces of crumbling parchment. But Conan's taste had never run to spells and counter-spells. He trusted his keen edged sword more than all the magical mummery. However, he reached the tower without seeing a single sign of life among the shrubs and flowers.

Just then the clouds slid away from the moon. By the bright moonlight Conan saw that the yellowish color of the tower was caused by an abundance of small golden coins set in plaster. Conan peered at those on a level with his eyes. None was familiar, and he suspected that it was the same with the rest. All had the look of great age.

Conan knew that gold was considered a valuable auxiliary in making magic, especially in the form of coins from the ancient kingdoms. Here, thought Conan, were tokens from the long-dead realms of forgotten legendry, when priests and wizards ruled with awful terror, dragging naked virgins screaming to dark caverns where ghastly rituals were performed, or beheading thousands of prisoners in the public squares until rivers of bubbling blood filled the gutters.

Conan shivered. Much evil was concentrated here. Nevertheless, he tried the iron door.

The heavy slab of metal swung silently inward. Sword in hand, the Cimmerian entered, senses fine-whetted like those of a prowling tiger. By the faint light coming through the open door he could see two flights of stairs, one circling upwards while the other lost itself in

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the underground darkness.

Conan's keen nostrils picked up an alien smell from the stairs leading downwards. He suspected that this musky odor wafted up from a maze of caverns beneath the tower.

Suddenly he was startled by words in a deep resonant voice: "Welcome, Conan! Mount the stairs leading upward and follow the light!"

Glaring about, Conan could detect no clue to the origin of the voice. It seemed to come from everywhere, reverberating like the tines of a temple gong.

A glowing ball sprang into view in front of Conan, so suddenly that he took an instinctive step backwards. It hung in the air without visible support, shining brightly. By its light Conan saw that he stood in a hall adorned with tapestries of ancient and curious design.

The glowing globe moved slowly towards the stairs. Conan followed it without hesitation. One never knew the mind of a wizard, but Pelias at any rate seemed well-disposed towards the Cimmerian.

Not a creak sounded from the steps as Conan glided upwards, sword still in hand. The steps ended on a landing barred by a copper-sheathed door with esoteric signs engraved in fanciful and involved patterns on its ruddy surface. Some of these Conan recognized from his wanderings as powerful magical symbols from the secret knowledge of ancient races. He scowled distrustfully. Then the door opened silently and the shimmering light went out.

Now there was no need of it. The room Conan entered was large and well-lighted. It was furnished with a mixture of flamboyant wall-decorations and expensive works of art from many lands. A multitude of wall-brackets held flaming tapers; soft rugs covered the floor.

In the center of the room stood an enormous pillow-strewn divan. On this lay Pelias a tall lean gray-haired man in scholar's robes. His eyes were dark and meditative, his head narrow and well-formed, his hands and feet small and trim. He had been studying, for several volumes were scattered about the floor. Close by the divan, a large table was littered with parchment scrolls. At least they looked like parchment, though Conan knew that wizards preferred their mightiest spells to be written on cured human skin.

On the wall hung a mirror in a simple iron frame, contrasting with the luxury of the other furnishings. Conan was not surprised by the sybaritic atmosphere. Unlike most sorcerers, Pelias had never looked askance upon the pleasures of the flesh.

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"Welcome, Conan!" cried the magician. "It has been five years—" Then Pelias sprang up with narrowed eyes as Conan walked heavily forward, sheathing his sword. "You are wounded! And lately! You need a stronger draught than this wine. Wait!"

Pelias turned to an ornately-carved cupboard and opened one of its many small doors. From a recess he took a crystal flask, half full of a liquid of smoky violet hue. Into a wine-cup he poured a good measure of the liquid and proffered it, saying:

"Drink this, my friend. It is made from the secret herbs of the Misty Isles and the lands beyond Kush. It will heal your wounds and ease your tired muscles."

Conan downed the draught with one mighty gulp. For a moment he grimaced. His veins seemed afire and his brain whirled and reeled. Then these feelings were replaced by sensations of well-being and content. A vast weight of weariness seemed lifted from his shoulders; he had not realized how fatigued his wounds and exertions had left him.

Pulling off his dented helmet, Conan felt his tingling scalp under the bandage. His chair was still matted with dried blood, but no wound could he find, not even a scar. His side and other wounded parts had stopped aching.

"Truly this is a magical brew, Pelias!" he said.

"It is potent indeed. Apart from the rare ingredients, many potent incantations have been read over it to bring out the full powers of the recipe."

Conan grunted as he pulled off his mailshirt. "Would I had possessed it many a former time in my life!"

"Let us move on to the question of your errand. What brings you alone and in haste? I have not heard of any strife or great wars in the northwest, in which you might need my aid."

"Were it only straightforward war, I would never ask magical help," growled Conan. "But I find myself pitted against dark and unknown powers. I need clues to lead me to where I can smite my foe."

In swift, short sentences he told of the fateful event in Tarantia.

For a long time Pelias brooded with his chin in his hands. His eyes were closed, and some might have thought him asleep. Conan, however, knew, that the wizard's brain was working with abnormal speed and keenness behind that deceptive mask. Slowly Pelias' eyes opened.

"A demon of the darkest realms beyond the Mountains of the Night has stolen your spouse. I know how to summon one, but I thought I shared that knowledge with

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no one else in the West."

"Then fetch this fiend and we'll wring the truth out of him!"

"Not so fast, my hot-headed friend! Do not rush headlong into unknown dangers! It is clear that this demon has been summoned by a sorcerer with powers superior to those of ordinary magicians. Should we drag the fiend hither with spells and incantations, we should have both him and his master to cope with, and that might be too much for us. No; I know a better way. The Mirror of Lazbekri shall give us the answer!"

He rose. Again opening the cupboard, he brought out a dully-gleaming cup whose rim was inscribed with curious symbols.

From a small jar the wizard poured a measure of red powder into the cup. Then he placed the cup on a low ebony table beneath the plain iron-framed mirror. He threw back the folds of silk from his arm and made a cryptic gesture.

Blue smoke began to spiral up from the cup. It thickened until its billowing clouds filled the room. Conan could but dimly discern the motionless form of the wizard, petrified in trance during his concentration.

For an age, it seemed, nothing happened. Conan began to shift his weight with impatience when he heard Pelias' whisper:

"The sorcerer's defenses are strong, Conan. I cannot pierce them. Who is your tutelary deity?"

"It would be Crom, the grim god of the Cimmerians," muttered Conan, "though I have had nought to do with gods for many years. I leave them alone and they leave me alone."

"Well, pray to your Crom for help. We need it."

Conan closed his eyes and, for the first taime in decades, prayed: "O Father Crom, who breathes power to strive and slay into a man's soul at birth, help your son against the demon that has stolen his mate..."

And into his brain he thought he heard the cold words come: "Long have you forsaken me, O Conan. But you are my true son for all that, in your striving and enduring and conquering. Look!"

Conan opened his eyes. The smoke had begun to thin. The Cimmerian saw that the mirror did not, as one might expect, show the reflection of Pelias; indeed, it showed no reflection at all. Its surface was deep gray, as if this were a window to forbidden dimensions. In a low monotone, Pelias chanted an incantation in a tongue that Conan recognized as the secret language used by the priests of Stygia in their clandestine rituals in dark-walled Khemi.

Slowly, so slowly that it

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was not immediately noticeable, a picture took form in the mirror. At first it was blurred and uncertain; then swiftly it cleared and sharpened. In a bare, stonewalled room a cowled and robed figure sat at a low table, a scroll in its hands.

The picture grew as if the point of vantage of the watchers moved nearer and nearer the hooded one. Suddenly the figure in the mirror threw up its head and looked full into their faces. The hood fell back from the yellow, hairless pate; the slitted, oblique eyes gazed coldly into theirs. The yellow one's right hand plunged into the folds of his robe and came out again holding a shining ball. The man made a motion as if to throw it—and then Conan exploded into lightning action.

A whistling slash of his heavy sword, held in readiness against the unknown perils of the mirror, sheared the frame in two and shattered the reflecting surface into thousands of tinkling splinters.

Pelias gave a start and shook himself like a man awakening. He said:

"By Ishtar, Conan, you saved us both! That shining thing was as deadly as a nest of cobras. Had he managed to throw it into this room, we should have been torn to bits in a holocaust that might have destroyed half the city. I was spell-bound by the necessary concentration and could do nothing."

"The devil with that," grunted Conan, who had never learned to accept praise graciously. "Now, what did all this mean? I saw the man was a Khitan. What has he to do with my quest?"

Pelias' somber eyes rested upon the huge Cimmerian as his answer came from stiff lips. "My friend, these matters are deeper than I thought. The fate of the world may rest upon you."

The sorcerer paused, swilling a draught of wine. Leaning back on his cushions, he continued.

"The magicians of the West have long been aware that the effects of certain spells have been weakened or nullified. This condition has been growing more marked in recent years. During the past few months I have buried myself in research, prying for the cause of this phenomenon. And I have found it.

"We are entering a new era. Enlightenment and reason are spreading among the peoples of the West. Aquilonia stands as a bulwark among the nations, strengthening its imperial powers by the naked, elemental force of the healthy barbarian mind. You have rejuvenated the nation, and similar forces are at work in other realms. The bonds of black

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magic are strained and broken by new factors brought in by the changed conditions.

"Some of the most evil spells would now hardly succeed at all in the Western realms. This resistance of civilization to the magic of darkness is concentrated in the barbarian king of Aquilonia. You have long been the center of mighty happenings, and the gods look favorably upon you.

"I grow old, I who am already older than men reckon. Nowadays I use my vast knowledge only to furnish a life of ease and comfort and to pursue my scholarly researches. I do not live as an ascetic in ragged robes, summoning red-eyed beings with slavering jaws and dripping claws to wreak havoc among innocent human beings.

"But there is one who has long thirsted for absolute power over the world and all that dwell therein. Years ago he began to lay the groundwork for the gigantic, cataclysmal acts of dark necromancy that should rock the earth to its core and enslave its inhabitants.

"This I learned through my unearthly spies: When, one night, he cut out the living heart of a virgin on an altar in a deserted temple by moonlight and mumbled a terrible incantation over it, he failed to get the results he sought. He was dumbfounded; this was his first attempt upon the Western countries.

"His failure roused him to insensate rage. For days and nights without end he labored to find who opposed him, and at last he succeeded. *You* are his main obstacle.

"This dark plan, whose outlines I now grasp, is worthy of his twisted genius. By stealing your spouse, he forces you to go after her. He is sure you will be slain by foes along the way or slaughtered by the strange and unknown peoples that dwell east of the Himelian Mountains. Should you by some feat of prowess or stroke of luck reach his haunts, he counts on slaying you himself by his diabolical powers.

"After that, the road to conquest will be open to him, for the resistance forged here in the West is too young yet to stand without its backbone—Conan, the king of Aquilonia!"

Dryness rasped Pelias' throat; he sipped the wine.

"As you know, I am accounted one of the mightiest magicians of the West, even though I nowadays seldom use my full powers. But should I be pitted against him of whom I speak, I should not have the chance of a ewe in a pool of crocodiles. The sorcerers of the East are mightier than those of the West, and he is the mightiest of all. He is Yah Chieng of Paikang, in Khitai."

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Conan pondered this information with somber eyes and immobile features. "By Crom, Pelias, there rests more upon my shoulders than I could ever fathom, if what you've said is true. But I care not for the fate of the world, if I can only get my Zenobia back!"

"Ah, my friend, the fate of you, of your queen, and of the world are fast entwined. This is Yah Chieng's supreme bid for power. He is sure of success, or the crawling snake would not have dared attempt it. This kidnapping is but a trick to lure you from the West, which you are guarding against evil Eastern sorcery. Think, man, and compare! Which is the more important: a single woman or the fate of millions?"

"The devil with that, Pelias!" roared Conan. "D'you think I would let my woman be torn from my side and then stay at home because I am some sort of wizard's jinx? May the demons of Shaggali eat the marrow of my bones if I care one copper's worth for kingship, power, lands, or riches! I want my woman back, and I'll have her if I must carve my way through a hundred thousand swordsmen to reach that bald-pated scoundrel!"

Pelias shrugged. He realized that the savage promptings that guided the barbarian's actions would not be affected by his disclosure of the deeper causes of the recent events. The only world Conan really cared about was the one that now surrounded him with red-blooded life. Pelias said:

"Alas, the Fates have already spun their web, and I cannot change it. Now listen. Paikang, in Khitai, is your goal. There Yah Chieng lives in his purple tower, guarded by two hundred giant Khitan sabremen, the most skilled in the East. He has usurped the power of the rightful rulers, and he governs with flail and whip. Beware his black arts. By a wave of his hand he can blot an army from the earth. I know not if I can help you, but I will try. Come with me."

The lean wizard rose and went to a small, gold-inlaid secretary-table made of some strange wood. He pressed a projection hidden among the carvings of one leg of the table. A small drawer shot out, and the wizard picked an object from it. It was a ring. Strangely wrought, it did not shine with the fire of gold, nor with the icy gleam of silver, nor yet with the rich red of copper. Its dull-blue lustre was not like that of any known metal. All along its band were hieroglyphs of ancient origin.

The seal, also, was strangely fashioned. It was of rhombic shape with the upper and lower points long and sharp. A careless man could easily prick himself with it.

Pelias gazed at the ring for

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a moment. Its strange blue gleam was like a sword of icy flame in the room. The Cimmerian, with his fine-whetted senses, could feel the power emanating from the thing. Then the wizard straightened and brushed back a grizzled lock from his forehead.

"Many moons have passed since I won this ring," he intoned. "For days and nights without cease I fought its owner, a powerful sorcerer of Luxor. The fury of the dark powers we unleashed might have devastated the land had not our spells and counterspells canceled each other. With brain whirling and senses reeling, I strove with him through eons of black time. When I felt I could not continue much longer, he suddenly gave up. He changed his form to that of a hawk and tried to flee. My strength resurged within me: I transformed myself into an eagle, swooped upon him, and tore him to shreds. Ha! Those were the days when I was young and gloried in my powers!

"Now, my friend, I want you to wear this ring. It will be a powerful aid on your journey. Have you heard of Rakhamon?"

Conan nodded. The southern countries were rife with legends of the past, but still the name of that dread sorcerer were whispered with caution, though a full century and a half had passed since his end.

Many adepts in magic had sought for his secret books, said to be written on the dried skins of virgins flayed alive, but none had found them. If this ring was a relic of Rakhamon's possessions, it must be powerful indeed.

"Aye, this is the ring of Rakhamon," said Pelias gravely. "Some of the unnatural beings summoned from the darker realms could not, once called, be controlled by the usual protective spells. Therefore he fashioned this ring of a metal he found in the stone of a fallen star during his travels in the icy north. He invested the ring with unimaginable powers by secret and nameless rituals, in which blood was spilled in profusion and screaming souls were condemned to the deepest and darkest hell. The wearer of this ring can stand against any beast summoned by magical arts, that much I know.

"As to its detailed use, there is no clue. Probably the knowledge perished with the secret manuscripts. Take it, Conan! This is all I can aid you with. No other spells I know can avail against the evil power of Yah Chieng."

Conan took the proffered ornament. At first it seemed too small for his massive fingers, but as he tried it on the middle finger of his left hand it slid lightly on. It seemed to have a life of its own; it

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fitted as if made to order. The Cimmerian shrugged. Decades of experience had made him casual about the pretensions of magical things. The bauble might work, and if not no harm would come of it.

"To the devil with all this talk," said the barbarian. "I have a long journey before me. A loaf, a joint of meat, and a skin of wine, and I am for bed. Could you spare me a cot for the night?"

"Any sort of bed you desire, my friend. My servants will fetch food and tend your horse." Pelias clapped his hands.

"That reminds me," said Conan, yawning. "I must sacrifice a bullock to Crom ere I set forth tomorrow. Say nothing of it, for, if they knew, people would say: Conan grows old; he is getting religious in his dotage!"

2. VENGEANCE FROM THE DESERT.

The sun glinted on spired helmets and steel spearheads. Spurs jungled and colorful silks flashed as three armored riders breasted the long slope of a great sand-dune in the wide desert that formed the southwestern marches of Turan. Upright from the boots that hung from the saddles of two of them rose the ten-foot Turanian lances. The remaining carried, slung from his saddle, a thick double-curved bow in a bow-case and a score and a half of arrows in a lacquered leathern quiver.

Accompanying them was a fourth figure, bound by both wrists to a rope held by a bowman. Deep gashes in the sand told of this prisoner's inability to keep up with his mounted captors. He wore the white khalat of the desert Zuagir, though the garment was dirty and torn to shreds. His lean dark visage was hollow-cheeked, but implacable hatred lurked in his red-rimmed eyes.

The Turanian soldiers, separated from the rest of their troop by a two-day sandstorm, were seeking their way back to Fort Wakla, a Turanian outpost deep in the Zuagir desert country. Yesterday they had met the Zuagir. His horse had tumbled under him with an arrow through its heart, and he had been laid senseless on the sand by a blow from a spear-butt. The commander of Fort Wakla had lately begun an intense campaign against the desert tribes, which had harried Turanian caravans overly much of late. Having taken the Zuagir prisoner, the horsemen were bringing him back to the fort to be bled of knowledge before being hanged.

At the top of the dune, the little troop paused to rest. Sand-dunes stretched as far as the eye could see. As practiced warriors, the Turanians used the pause to let their hawk-like eyes sweep the hor-

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izon and the surface of the sands.

The tallest of the three, the man with the bow and the prisoner's rope, suddenly stiffened. On the top of a dune a mile away he had sighted a lone horseman riding at a gallop. The dune had hidden him as they came to their point of vantage, but now the stranger was flying down the near side in a flurry of sand.

"By the alabaster hips of Yenagra!" he said. "We have caught another desert rat! Be ready; we will kill this one and take his head on a lance-tip back to the fort."

Knowing there would be no trouble to recover the Zuagir after the fight, he dropped the rope. He spurred his mount down the slope towards the point in the wide valley of sand where he counted on intercepting the stranger, and in one smooth motion drew the powerful bow from its case and nocked an arrow. His fellow-troopers followed with spears poised.

At three hundred paces, the bowman drew and loosed at full gallop with the effortless horsemanship of a Turanian cavalryman. But the shaft did not strike home. Like lightning his intended victim flung his horse aside with a mighty effort that almost threw the steed. With a swift gesture, the stranger shook off the folds of his khalat.

The Hyrkanians halted in consternation. There appeared before them not the half-starved form of a desert man, armed only with knife and javelin, but a powerful Western warrior in sturdy mail and steel helmet, equipped with a long sword and dagger. The sword flashed like a flame in the sunlight as the rider whipped it out. The Turanian leader's narrow eyes widened with astonishment.

"You dare return to Turan, barbarian scoundrel!" he cried. For the Turanian was Hamar Kur, who had been emir of a troop of horses that Conan, as a leader of the *kozaki,* had routed years before by an ambush on the Yelba River. Hamar Kur was demoted to common trooper in the frontier guards in consequence. Drawing his saber, he shouted:

"At him, men! It is Conan the kozak! Slay him, and the king will fill your helmets with gold!"

The Turanian riders hesitated, awed by the memory of gory and terrible legends associated with that name. They told how he, with a band of Zuagir tribesmen, had harried the outflung Imperial posts in the south until the border had to be drawn back. They told how the savage kozak hordes under his command had stormed the walled city of Khorosun, slaying and burning.

Conan made full use of his

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enemies' moment of indecision. Spurring his big horse, he thundered upon them like a one-man avalanche, his sword flashing in circles. Hamar Kur's mount reared wildly before this crashing charge and was cast to the ground.

The two other soldiers couched their lances and spurred fiercely, but lacked time to gain enough speed to make their charge effective. With the fury of a thunderstorm Conan was upon them, smiting right and left. The head of one man leaped from its trunk on a fount of blood. The next instant, Conan's blade shattered the other's lance. The Turanian caught the following blow on his shield but was hurled from his saddle by sheer impact.

Hamar Kur had regained his feet. Skilled in combat against horsemen, he ran to where the slain trooper had dropped his lance. Then he ran swiftly up and thrust the shaft of the weapon between the legs of the Conan's horse. He cast himself aside at the last moment to avoid the barbarian's terrible sword.

The desert sands clouded the sky as Conan and his mount crashed to the ground together. With the practiced ease of the hardened mercenary, the Cimmerian threw himself clear. He rose, sword still in hand. With cold blue eyes slitted he watched his two surviving enemies slink towards him, one from either side.

With tigerish swiftness, he charged the soldier to the right. The Turanian tried to parry the crashing blow, but to no avail. Splintering the curved blade with its terrible force, the Cimmerian's sword smashed helmet and skull like a ripe orange.

Conan wheeled like a panther in the nick of time. He just managed to catch Hamar Kur's whistling blow on his sword-hilt. There was a momentary exchange of cuts and parries as the straight blade of the West and the curved blade of the East whirled about each other in a coruscating dance of death. Then a quick thrust from Conan pierced his enemy's breast. The point drove through the fine Turanian mail and on through the ex-emir's body. Hamar gave a ghastly scream and fell heavily.

The Cimmerian wiped his sword on his enemy's sash and looked swiftly around. He had heard a sound from behind, and his senses and temper were on edge. He waited warily as a tattered figure half slid and half rolled down the slope almost to his feet. It was the Zuagir. Rising on shaky legs, he spat upon the prostrate form of Hamar Kur. Then he turned his burning eyes on Conan. As he took in the gigantic figure in worn mail, the rage and fury in his eyes gave

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way to recognition and joy. Lifting his bound hands, he cried:

"Praise be to Kemosh, for he has answered my prayers and sent these dogs to the floors of Hell! And more, he has brought back the great warlord who led us to plunder long ago! I greet you, Hawk of the Desert! The Turanian dogs will cower in their towers as the cry goes forth from the desert: 'Yamad al-Aphta has returned!'"

Conan shrugged his broad shoulders and thrust his sword back into the scabbard. His horse had risen from its fall, and Conan unslung his waterskin and pack from the saddle.

"Here, wolf," he grunted, "you look a little the worse for wear. Have a draught, but take care you are not overfilled." Conan brought out bread and dried meat and shared them with the Zuagir. "Now tell me: What is afoot in the desert? How did you fall into the hands of the Hyrkanians?"

The nomad answered between gulps and champings: "I am Yar Allal of the Duali tribe. I was riding in haste and alone for our camp when these dogs caught me. They were bringing me back to Fort Wakla for questioning and death."

"Whence your hurry?" asked Conan. "And why alone? These hills swarm with Turanian patrols."

The voice of the Zuagir took on a burning edge as he answered. "A terrible misfortune has struck our tribe. Listen, my lord. For days we lay in wait in the ruins of the Gharat temple, fifty miles to the south. Word had come that a rich caravan was approaching from the west, bringing the wealth and person of the lady Thanara."

"Who's that?"

"A *yedka* of Maypur, famed for her beauty and riches. Furthermore she is high in the favor of King Yezdigerd. Could we but capture her, a fabulous ransom would be ours as well as the spoils from the camel-train.

"We lay there with knives whetted and bows newly strung until we thought the dogs of traders would never come. And then, one day, we heard the camels' bells in the distance.

"We waited until they were almost upon us. Uttering our warcry, we swept down upon them. We expected an easy conquest of the merchants and their retainers. Then, suddenly, the merchants and servants threw aside their khalats. Instead of timid civilians, mailed lancers in the white turbans of the Imperial Guard rushed against us!

"There must have been a hundred of them hidden in the wains. They rode through our ranks like reapers mov-

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ing down a field of wheat. Half of us perished in the first attack. We fought mightily against the odds, and many a Turanian plunged to earth with a Duali spear through his throat or a curved knife in his guts.

"But our courage was of no avail as the steel-clad ranks closed in upon us. Then Yin Allal, my father, caught a blow on the head that knocked him stunned from the saddle. I spurred my horse; smiting and thrusting I won through and away. They pursued me for hours, but their horses were wearier than mine and they gave it up. I was on my way to raise the tribe as I was caught. By now the caravan is safely within the walls of Fort Wakla. There will be rejoicing among the Turanians tonight; not for decades have they captured a Zuagir chief alive!"

"How you know he is alive?"

"In the last moment ere I raced off, I looked back and saw two of them carrying him back towards the carts. He was moving, though feebly."

Conan digested his tale. He well remembered Yin Allal, one of his staunchest supporters of old, when he, as warchief of three united Zuagir tribes, had led them in daring raids against the Turanians. Confronted by this new problem, he did not wish to leave an old friend unaided in the hands of his enemies. He sprang up, his blue eyes flashing with determination.

"Catch yourself a horse!" he snapped. "We ride for the Duali oasis at once. We shall be there by nightfall, and if my name is not forgotten I'll raise the tribes again. We'll pull those dogs' beards yet, by Crom!"

With a laugh he flung himself into the saddle. Gesturing to his companion to follow, he spurred his horse into a fierce gallop.

The oasis lay enfolded in the black arms of the desert night. Stars twinkled like gems on a dark mantle studded with d i a m o n d s; the fronds of the palms, now and then moving before the slight evening breeze, were silvered by the cold moonlight. In the shadow of the foliage were strewn a profusion of tents—a large Zuagir camp.

Earlier in the day this had been a quiet place. The desert sun poured its golden rays upon the camel's-hair dwellings. Veiled women went about their primitive duties, fetching water from the well and broiling strips of meat over the campfires. Snores and snuffles sounded from the nomadic abodes as the tribesmen took their siesta.

Now the Duali oasis was a center of frantic activity. In the middle rose a tent whose size indicated its importance. From this tent, now

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and then, a lean desert hawk emerged. The Zuagir would hurry with flapping khalat to his horse, spring into the saddle, and urge the mount into a mad race out over the desert. Others returned from their missions, flinging themselves from foam-flecked steeds to hasten towards the big central tent. Zuagirs from the neighboring tribes of the Kharoya and Qirlata had been pouring in all day. Now the area covered by dun-colored tents was thrice as large as the day before. There was an orderly bustle such as is seldom seen in a desert camp.

The hearts of the robed and bearded chiefs in the central tent swelled with pride and affection. The huge figure in worn mail, seated in the place of honor, had become the center of legendry and hero-worship since the day long ago when he had arrived among them. He united their bickering clans and led them in raids so daring, bloody, and rewarding that tales of them were still told around the campfires. Their superstitious minds regarded the return of the big Cimmerian as a good omen. Petty inter-tribal quarrels were swept away by the return of the Hawk of the Desert.

"The fort is impregnable to a straight assault," he said bluntly. "We have no ballistae or other siege-engines to reduce it by force. It is well provisioned, like all these Turanian outposts, and might hold out for a year. Moreover, a determined sally by their seasoned squadrons would scatter our irregular ranks. Our chance is to come to grips with them inside the walls, where cavalry tactics cannot be used and we have the advantage of numbers. Trickery must be used.

Let us equip a caravan-train from the loot stored here in this oasis. Fifty of us, garbed as merchants, slaves, retainers, and camel-drivers shall take the caravan to the fort, as if we were on the road to Khardpur. At the twelfth hour we shall cut down the guards at the gate, open up, and let in the horde. We shall pillage, burn, sack, and slay until the streets run red with Turanian blood!"

The Cimmerian rose, hitching at his scabbard. "To work, desert dogs! Before sunrise, I want such a camel-train as would make any Zuagir's mouth water!"

Camel-bells tinkled. The feet of men and beasts raised clouds of dust as the long line passed through the gate of Fort Wakla. At the gate, the lean merchant in the lead declared: "Lord, I am Zebah, a Shemite of Anakia. I have come up from Yukkub to barter my goods in Khardpur."

"Who is this?" asked the gate-captain, pointing to one man in a capacious khalat.

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"This is my personal servant and bodyguard," declared the leader, "a Stygian. The others are hired guards, camel-drivers, and slaves. By Ashtoreth, it is good to be safely within walls again! I had feared attacks from the Zuagir bands. But the gods protected us, so none of those stinking vermin of the desert assailed us."

The captain of the watch grinned. "Your precautions were wasted, my man. Just now a naked woman could ride alone and unmolested along the caravan-trail. Yesterday a squadron of the Imperial Guards smashed a host of the desert rats and captured their chieftain."

"Ah!" said the Shemite. "That is indeed glorious news."

"All in the day's work. But at least this show of force should stop the raids for a while. Veziz Shah has ordered us to slay any Zuagir, man, woman, or child, caught by our patrols. By the time you return to Yukkub, you will be able to travel the length and the breadth of the Zuagir desert without fear of molestation."

"I will burn an offering to Bel as a measure of my gratitude," said the merchant, as the last of the camels shambled through the gate. Four guardsmen closed the gate; its ironclad valves swung creakingly shut on hinges as thick as a man's leg.

The fort was really a small city. A high crenelated wall of stone girded the mass of buildings with parapets and battlements. The space within was roomy, and merchants and thieves found their means of support in the profusion of buildings. Isolated as it was, Fort Wakla must contain within itself the means of civilized living, with drinking-shops, brothels, and gambling-houses to keep the garrison happy.

At the spacious marketplace in the center, mailed soldiers in spired helmets and robed merchants with exotic wares and veiled women milled about. To one side rose the mighty citadel where the governor lived, a fortress in itself with gray stone walls, narrow windows, and heavy copper doors. Those who had been inside, however, averred that the interior belied the grimness of the outside. It was heaped with art-treasures, fitted with comfortable furniture, and stocked with fine wine and viands.

Evening had come. The sky darkened swiftly, and here and there candles and lamps illuminated the windows. Sweating taverners bore wine-casks from their cellars for the evening rush of customers. The colorful night-life of a Hyrkanian city was beginning.

In the quarters by the western wall, reserved for visiting caravans, arguments

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raged around the campfires of Conan's band. Nearly all advocated staying there in safety, unsuspected, until the appointed hour had come. But Conan was of another mind. With a good two hours to spare, he meant to find out as much as he could about the disposition of the enemy. The quarters of the officers and common soldiers he had already located, close by the main gate, but he did not know the number of the troops quartered there.

"May the fiends cut off your tongues!" he rumbled. "I will do as I have said. In the tavern district there will be scores of drunken soldiers off duty. From one of them I shall get the information I want if I have to wring it from him like a s o d d e n cloth!"

The iron determination of the Cimmerian swept aside the objections of his followers. He wrapped his khalat about him and strode away, hiding his face under the kaffia.

The fumes of sour wine, stale beer, and sweat struck Conan in the face as he entered the first drinking-shop. The carousal was in full swing. Wenches hurried to and fro with jacks of foaming ale and flagons of wine, while painted hussies dawdled on the knees of half-drunken soldiers who emptied their wine-cups, yelling for more.

Seeking out a small secluded table in a darker corner, the big barbarian sat down upon a creaking chair and ordered a tankard of beer. Slaking his thirst in gulps, he looked around. A pair of drunken lancers were wrestling on the floor amid shrieks and titters from the women. A game of dice was in progress at a neighboring table. The Cimmerian relaxed.

"What about a drink, you silent dullard?"

With a crash of overturned chairs, a giant man-at-arms pushed through the throng, leaving a train of furious curses in his wake. He flung himself down upon the unoccupied seat at Conan's table. His eyes were glassily belligerent, and his gilded mail and silken sash were splashed with wine from his cup.

Conan's eyes narrowed. The man wore the scarlet mantle and white turban of the Imperial Guards. The turban sported a peacock-feather, the emblem of a captain of these elite troops.

No doubt he belonged to that detachment that routed the Zuagirs and took Yin Allal prisoner.

With a show of bluff intimacy, the big Cimmerian leaned forward, his face still hidden in the shadow of his kaffia. "Do not wonder that I find this place dull. I came in only to slake my thirst." He gave the soldier a friendly

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punch in the shoulder. "I'm on my way to a pleasure-house where the women are so fair and skilled as to rival the courtezans of Shadizar!"

The captain hiccuped, shook his head, and focused his eyes with an effort. "Huh? Women? Good idea. Who are you, anyway?"

"Hotep of Khemi, bodyguard to the merchant Zebah. Come along with me, man! A visit to this place will surfeit you for a month."

Conan was not an expert dissembler. His performance would have aroused the suspicion of a shrewd and sober man. However, the drunken stupor of the Turanian left room for nothing but his most primitive instincts. Breathing hard, he leaned forward with a loud belch, staring blearily at Conan.

"Lead me there, man! I have wandered too long over the cursed desert without a woman."

"Were you with the party that ambushed the Zuagirs?"

"With them? I commanded them!"

"Good for you!"

"Aye; that was a noble fight. But the only wench in the caravan was the yedka Thanara, may the gods smite her haughty body with boils!"

"She refused you?"

"Worse! She slapped me when I tried to kiss her in her tent!"

"The insolence of her!" said Conan.

"Nor was that all. Would you believe it, she threatened to have me flayed in the great square of Aghrapur if I did not behave? Me, Ardashir of Akif! Behave myself! As if any red-blooded man could control himself when casting his eyes upon her!"

"It is shameful, how women treat us."

"Enough of that. Lead me to your pleasure-house, Stygian. I need forgetfulness and surcease."

Rising unsteadily, the Turanian pushed through the throng. Conan followed. In the street, the cool night air was like a slap in the face with a wet cloth. The captain sobered visibly as he walked. Suddenly curious, he peered at the half-hidden face of his companion, who hurried silently at his side.

"Ho," he said, "wait a moment, my fleet-footed friend! You have not described the whereabouts of this magical house of women, of which I have never heard though I know Wakla well. Let's have a look under your headsheet—"

Ardashir's speech was cut short by a powerful hand on his throat. Normally accounted the strongest man in his company, he was, in his unsteady condition, helpless against the suddenness of the assault and the gorilla-like power of the Cimmerian.

He was swiftly dragged

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into a dark lane, struggling for breath and clawing at the hands that throttled him. When he was almost unconscious, he was swifty trussed with his own sash. Roughly turned over on his back, he felt the burning eyes of his captor upon him as the barbarian spoke heavily accented Hyrkanian in a sibilant whisper:

"You asked my name, Eastern dog! Have you heard of Conan, called Yamad al-Aphta by the Zuagirs? Chief of the *kozaki* and the Vilayet pirates?"

The Turanian could do no more than make a choking sound in his bruised throat. Conan continued: "I have returned from the West, and now I will have information from you if I have to burn out your eyes or skin the soles of your feet to get it!"

Though a tough and courageous man, Ardashir was paralyzed with shock. Normal enemies, such as Zuagir bands, Kshatriya legions, or the defending troops of invaded Western nations he had faced with the fatalistic hardihood of the seasoned warrior. But this barbarian giant, kneeling over him with poised dagger, was regarded with superstitious dread by the Turanians. The saga of his daring exploits had invested him with magical powers in their eyes, until his name was spoken like that of a mythical ogre. Ardashir knew that the barbarian's threats were not idle. Yet it was not the fear of torture but rather the numbing realization of the identity of his captor that loosed Ardashir's tongue.

By prodding a little with his dagger, Conan gathered his news. The regular garrison of twelve hundred horse was quartered in the barracks by the main gate, while the hundred men of the Imperial Guard were spread over the city in temporary quarters. The desert chieftain was clained in the dungeon beneath the governor's tower. The lady Thanara was also quartered in the tower

Conan pondered the situation. He knew that the barracks formed a square with a single exit. He had over two thousand determined nomads at his disposal.

A glance at the moon told him the twelfth hour was near. It was time to hurry. He tested the bonds of his captive, gagged him with his own turban, dragged him farther into the lane, and left him there, glaring and straining.

"I must be growing soft," Conan said to himself. "Time was when I should have cut the cur's throat after questioning him."

Faint, rapid drum-beats filled the luxurious apartment on the second floor of the governor's palace, where Tha-

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nara of Maypur lounged on a silken divan, nibbling fruit from a low table that stood on the thick rug in front of her couch. Her sheerly transparent gown revealed her seductive charms, but the man in the room paid scant attention to these.

This man was a small bandy-legged and mud-colored fellow clad in skins and furs. His flat, wrinkled, monkey-like face was painted with stripes and circles of red and black. His long black hair was gathered in greasy braids, and a necklace of human teeth encircled his neck. A powerful stench of sweat-soaked leather and unwashed human hide rose from him. He was a Wigur, one of those fierce and barbarous nomads from the far northeast beyond the Sea of Vilayet.

The little man sat cross-legged on the floor and stared at the thin curl of smoke that rose from a brazier on a tripod in front of him. The wavering blue column soared up from its source for two feet, then rippled and curled up on itself in interwoven arabesques. All the while the man kept up a swift tapping of his fingertips against a small drum, less than a foot across, which he held in his other hand.

At least the staccato tapping stopped.

"What see you, Tatur?" asked the yedka.

"He comes," said the shaman in a high singsong voice. "He whom you seek is near."

"How can he be?" said the lady Thanara sharply. "Veziz Shah keeps a sharp watch, and no such conspicuous rogue could gain admittance."

"Nevertheless, he approaches," whined Tatur. "The spirits do not lie. Unless you flee, he will soon confront you."

"He must have entered Wakla is disguise," mused Thanara. "If he comes upon me, what shall I do? Will your master, he who is not to be named, give me some means to cope with him?"

"It is the will of him who shall not be named that you should succeed in your mission," intoned the Wigur. He fumbled inside his sheepskin coat and brought out a small purple phial.

"A drop of this in his wine," he said, "will render him like one dead for three days."

"That is good. But the barbarian is wary, as we learned at Khanyria. Suppose he detects the drug and refuses to drink?"

Tatur brought out another object: a small pouch of soft leather. "In that case, this will lay him low if he breathe it."

"What is it?"

"Pollen of the yellow lotus of Khitai. Use it only as a last resort. For, should a breath of air blow it back upon you, you too will be

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cast into a swoon."

"That is good, but not enough. If your master really expects me to confront the Cimmerian, he should furnish me with a last-minute means of escape if I am trapped. And your master can do it, and he owes it to me for past services."

A faint smile creased Tatur's wrinkled features. "He who is not to be named said truly you are a sharp bargainer. Here." He brought out an object like a translucent egg. "Break this in your hour of need, and help will come to you from other dimensions."

Thanara examined the three objects. "Good," she said at last. "Ride to Aghrapur and tell the king I await Conan here. If all goes well, he shall have his enemy. If not, he will need a new agent. Haste and farewell!"

A few minutes later, Tatur the shaman, astride a small shaggy Hyrkanian pony, jogged off into the night across the sands at a tireless canter.

The night was cool and quiet. The captain of the watch at the main gate stretched and yawned. From the small guard-house in the square before the gate he could see two bowmen patrolling the parapet over the big twin doors. The pair of spearmen at the pillars flanking the entrance stood erect and still, the moonlight reflected by their polished mail-shirts and spired helmets. No need to fear anything; a stroke on the gong at his side would bring a company on the double from the barracks. Nevertheless, the governor had ordered the guards doubled and their vigilance increased.

The officer wondered. Did Veziz Shah really fear an attack on the fort on account of the captured Zuagir chief? Let the desert rats come! They would smash their heads against the walls while the archers riddled them with arrows.

The moon was obscured by clouds. Akeb Man blinked and peered. What had happened? It seemed as if the two archers on the wall had sat down for a moment. Now, however, they had risen again and resumed their measured pacing. Better investigate these lazy devils.

Rising, he gazed out again before the opening the door. At that instant the moonlight returned in full force. A shocking sight met his eyes. Instead of spired helmets and mantles, the archers wore banded kaffias and khalats.

Zuagirs!

How they had gotten in, only the devils knew. Akeb Man snatched at the hammer that hung beside the gong to strike the alarm.

The door of the guard-house burst in with a crash and fell in a cloud of splin-

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ters and dust. Akeb Man wheeled and snatched at his scimitar, but the sight of the man confronting him made him pause in astonishment. No white-clad desert raider was he, but a giant Western warrior in black mesh-mail, naked sword in hand.

With a cry of fear and rage, the Turanian lashed out with a low disemboweling thrust. With the swiftness of lightning, the mailed giant avoided the blade and brought his own long straight sword down in a whistling blow. Blood spurted like a fountain as Akeb Man sank to the floor, cloven to the breastbone.

Conan wasted no time in gloating. The big iron-sheathed doors were now opening, and through them poured a swift and silent-footed stream of white-robed nomads.

Swiftly, Conan issued his orders. His tones were low, but the words carried to the ears of all.

"Two men with torches, set the barracks afire. Three hundred archers with plenty of arrows place themselves to mow down the soldiers as they pour out. The rest of you, hit the fort with torch and sword. Do not break up into bands smaller than twenty. Thabit, bring your fifty with me. I am for the governor's palace."

With an imperious gesture, Conan dismissed his subchiefs and beckoned his fifty, who followed his long strides at a dog-trot. Behind them, smoking torches lit the square as the arsonists slunk towards the guardsmen's lodgings. Other bands vanished in different directions. The lean reavers licked their lips in anticipation of plunder and vengeance as they stalked along the silent streets, arrows nocked and knives and spears gleaming in the moonlight.

Conan led his men straight towards their goal. He intended to save Yin Allal first. Moreover, he was intrigued by the tale of the beautiful yedka. Here, he thought, he might find a prize precious enough to satisfy his own taste. He increased his speed, watching the dimmed doorways and nighted lane-mouths with smoldering eyes as he hurried past

As they emerged upon the central square, Conan mouthed a barbaric oath. Four sentries paced in pairs before the copper door of the residence. He had counted on taking the governor by surprise, but that was no longer possible. Swinging his great sword, he raced across the flagstones of the marketplace. Such was his speed that one of the spearmen was down with his side caved in before the others collected their shattered wits.

Two spearmen thrust their

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weapons against his broad breast, while the third put a horn to his lips and sent forth a bellowing signal. This was cut short by a well-aimed Zuagir arrow, which pierced the trumpeter's brain.

Conan parried the spear-thrusts with a fierce swipe of his sword that sheared off the heads of both weapons. With a vicious thrust he impaled one antagonist on his long blade. The Turanian fell sprawling against the other with a gurgle. The second man's sword-stroke at the Cimmerian's head went awry and struck sparks from the flagstones. In the next instant, the man was pincushioned with arrows. With a groan and a clatter of mail he fell.

Conan sprang forward and tried the copper door. In answer to the ringing note of the horn, people thrust their heads out of casements around the square. Archers appeared on some of the roofs; he must get into the tower before the foe had time to organize a defense.

The door opened before his thrusting shoulder. Leaving ten of his men to guard against attack from the rear, Conan led the rest inside.

With a clink of mail and a flash of sword-blades, ten soldiers in the white turbans of the Imperial Guard rushed against him out of a doorway. The Cimmerian's battle-cry rang high as he and his followers closed with their enemies. Many a curved knife or shortened spear found its mark in Turanian vitals, but the flashing scimitars also took a heavy toll. However, the bloodiest havoc wreaked was that of Conan's cross-hilted sword. In a couple of minutes, the ten Turanians lay in pools of blood, though eight silent figures in bloodstained khalats bore witness to the ferocity of the defense.

Conan swept up to the second floor, taking four steps at a stride. Pausing, he flung swift orders at his followers.

"Ten of you, search for the keys to the dungeon and free Yin Allal. The rest, take all the plunder you can carry. I'll pay the governor a visit."

As the Zuagirs, howling and laughing, stormed up and down the stairs, Conan broke the sandalwood door before him into splinters with a mighty kick. He found himself in the anteroom of the governor's apartments. Crossing the floor swiftly on sound-deadening mats, he halted in mid-step. From the other side of the door before him he heard a woman's voice raised in angry expostulation.

Conan's brows drew together in a vast frown. He picked up a heavy table and heaved it against the new obstacle. With a crashing impact the ungainly missile burst open the shattered

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door. He tossed the remains of the table aside and strode through.

At a table in the middle of the lamplit room stood a tall, powerful man of middle age. Conan knew him by description as Veziz Shah. Silken divans and tables laden with delicacies stood about on the rug-covered floor. On one table rested a flagon of wine with two filled goblets.

A woman rested on the divan. Her sheer silken gown revealed her charms. Conan gave a start. This was the girl who had accosted him in Khanyria and almost led him to his death!

No time now to mull over such matters. With a curse, the governor unsheathed his jeweled scimitar and advanced catlike upon the Cimmerian.

"You dare invade my chambers, you red-handed rogue!" he snarled. "I have heard you are on the rove again, and I hoped for the pleasure of having your limbs torn off by wild horses. But as it is—"

He whipped forward in a swift arching stroke. Most men would have been so distracted by his words as to have their throats slit by that whistling edge, but the pantherish speed of barbarian muscles saved Conan. Parrying with his hilt, he lashed out in a vicious counter-cut. In the exchange of blows and thrusts he soon found he faced one of the most skilled swordsmen he had ever met.

But no civilized fencer could match the skill and speed of Conan, hardened in wars and battles since boyhood against foes from all over the world. The skill at arms he had won as a mercenary would by itself have made him master of any ordinary swordsman, for his learning had been pounded into his brain in endless, bloody strife on far battlefields.

As the duel continued, Veziz Shah began to tire and his eyes filled with an awful fear. With a sudden cry he flung his scimitar into Conan's face and raced for the far wall. There his questing fingers probed the surface as if seeking the spring to open a hidden exit.

Conan avoided the missile with a jerk of his black-maned head. The next second his arm was around the neck and his knee in the back of the Turanian emir. His voice was a terrible whisper in Veziz Shah's ear.

"Dog, remember when you caught ten of my Afghulis when you commanded a squadron in Secunderam? And how you sent me their pickled heads in jars with wishes for a hearty repast? Your time has come. Rot in hell!"

With a terrible heave, the blood-mad Cimmerian forced his enemy's body backwards against the thrust of his knee

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until the Turanian's spine snapped like a dry twig. A lifeless corpse flopped to the floor. Sweating and panting, Conan turned to the woman on the divan.

Thanara had not moved during the fight. Now she rose, her supple body outlined through her silken nightgown. Eyes shining, she raised her arms and came fearlessly towards Conan, ignoring the bloody sword in his hand.

"You are a real man!" she whispered, pressing herself against his rough mail and twining her arms around his corded neck. "None other could have slain Veziz Shah. I am glad you did. He forced me by threats to come in here to do his bidding. I have nothing against loving a man, but I wish to do it of my own accord. Share my couch, barbarian!"

Conan felt the hot urge of his racing blood. In his younger days he would have swept the woman into his arms and damned the consequences. But now the caution of long experience asserted itself.

"You were clad otherwise when we met in Khanyria," he said, taking both her wrists in one big paw and drawing her firmly down to the couch beside him. "Tell me the tale behind that ambush, and your part in it. No lies, now, if you know what's good for you!"

The dark eyes under the long lashes regarded him without fear. A well-formed hand gently drew itself from his grasp and took one of the goblets of wine from the table. She handed him this vessel and began sipping the other herself.

"You must be thirsty after killing. Have a draught of this wine. Drink, and I will tell you the story you ask for."

Conan stared into the depths of the cup as Thanara's musical voice began: "I am Thanara, a yedka or high-born lady of Maypur. King Yezdigerd has graciously appointed me one of his personal agents—the eyes and ears of the king, as we call them in Turan. When word came that you had embarked on your lonely journey, I was sent to supervise the work of the stupid mercenaries engaged by our agent in Tarantia. I suppose—"

Conan hurled his cup to the floor and furiously turned upon the woman. He had sniffed the wine and let a little touch his tongue, and his keen barbarian senses told him of the threat that lurked in the cup. One huge hand fastened itself in her long black hair.

"I'll supervise you, strumpet!" he snarled. "I thought—"

Thanara's hand came up from behind her and flung into his face a pinch of the

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pollen of the yellow lotus. Conan jerked back, coughing and sneezing, and let go Thanara's hair. Holding her breath, she slipped out of his reach and stood up.

Snoring heavily, Conan sprawled upon the couch.

Thanara nodded in satisfaction. For the next two or three days he would be like a man stone dead.

A rising murmur from without attracted her attention. She stepped to a window overlooking the square and pulled back the curtains. At the sight she saw she jerked back. Houses flamed, fired by the ravaging Zuagir horde. Shrieks of captive women and curses of battling men echoed. White ghostly shapes flitted here and there. Evidently Conan had entered the fort, not alone as she had thought, but in the company of the desert wolves.

Swiftly she collected her wits. She grabbed a white robe from one of the chests and donned it. She armed herself with a long gold-hilted dagger. Thrusting aside the broken and staring corpse of the late governor, she searched with swift hands for the spring activating the secret door.

With a grating sound, a section of the wall swung inward, disclosing a spiral staircase leading downwards. She went back to the couch where the unconscious form of Conan rested. Grasping him beneath the armpits, she dragged him inside the secret door, straining her muscles to the utmost to move his great weight. She worked the spring from inside to close the door and laid the Cimmerian to rest on the steps.

Thanara hurried down the steps. Light came faintly from several narrow window-slits. On the ground floor she found herself in a small circular chamber. The exit worked in the same way as the entrance to the hidden passage. She pressed the stud and slipped out, taking good note of the means of reentry.

The fort was a hell. The Zuagirs had broken out the contents of the wine-cellars and gotten swiftly drunk. Their laughing torchmen had set fire to every house. Bands of captive women were rounded up and herded, with whiplashes and coarse jests, towards the main gate.

At the barracks the slaughter had been awful. The cornered soldiers rushing out through the only exit, had run into a hail of arrows from the waiting Zuagir archers. Hundreds of pincushioned bodies lay in heaps about the ruins of the barracks, while charred bodies in the debris showed that many had been caught by the flames before they could win out the door to face the arrows.

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Among the inner buildings of the fort, bands of blood-mad nomads were still cutting down the remnants of the company of the Imperial Guard who, awakened by the noise, burst out of their scattered lodgings.

Hardened to a life of raw experience, Thanara hurried through the dark streets. The way was lit only by the guttering flames of burning houses. Unfrightened by the corpses choking the gutters, she melted into dark doorways whenever a screaming Zuagir band shuffled by, swinging golden spoils and herding captive women. When passing the mouth of a small lane, she heard a gurgle. She peered swiftly into the gloom and discerned a prostrate figure. She also saw that it wore the spired helmet and fine-meshed mail coif of a Turanian Imperial Guard.

Hurrying into the narrow space, she bent and removed the gag from the man's mouth. She at once recognized Ardashir of Akif, half suffocated by the smoke of nearby fires but otherwise very much alive.

She cut his bonds and motioned him to rise and follow her. With the habits of an old soldier, he accepted her leadership without argument.

The journey back to the governor's palace was uneventful. The drunken bands seemed satisfied with their spoils and were drawing back out of the fort. Once, however, the Turanians were confronted by a pair of leering drunken desert raiders, but the Zuagirs could not match the swift strokes of Ardashir's scimitar by clumsy motions with their curved knives. Leaving their bloodied bodies behind, the couple won unscathed to the tower. They slipped into the secret entrance. Ardashir followed unwillingly as Thanara led the way up the stairs to where Conan lay.

Recognizing his foe, Ardashir snatched at his scimitar with an oath. Thanara caught his arm. "Calm yourself! Know you not that the king will shower us with gold if we bring the barbarian to him alive?"

Ardashir made a pungent suggestion as to what King Yezdigerd could do with his gold. "The swine has smirched my honor!" he shouted. "I will—"

"Hold your tongue, fool! What will happen to you when the king learns you have lost a whole company of his precious Imperials but escaped without a scratch yourself?"

"Hm," said Ardashir, his fury abating and giving way to calculation. Thanara continued:

"The king's most skilled executioners will have to meet in conclave to invent sufferings hellish enough to

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atone for the trouble he has given Turan. Take hold of your senses. Will you forsake wealth and a generalship for a moment of personal vengeance?"

Growling but quieted, Ardashir sheathed his sword and helped the girl to tie the barbarian's hands and feet. She whispered:

"We shall wait until dawn. By then the Zuagir bands will have left, and we shall take horses from some stable. The drunken raiders must have overlooked some. If we spur hard, we can be out of danger in half a day. We shall ride straight for the capital and drug our prisoner anew during the journey to keep him quiet. In five days he shall lie in the king's deepest dungeon in Aghrapur!"

3. THE PALACE ON THE CLIFF.

With head whirling, stomach knotted with nausea, and throat parched, Conan the Cimmerian slowly regained his senses. His last memory was of sitting on the sumptuous couch of Veziz Shah, governor of Fort Wakla. Now he found himself gazing at dank dripping walls, with the squeak of scuttling rats in his ears as he turned heavily over to sit up on a bed of moldy straw. As he moved, there was a jingle of heavy chains linking the fetters on his wrists and ankles with a massive bronze staple set in the wall. He was naked but for a loin-cloth.

His head felt as if it were going to split. His tongue stuck to his palate with thirst, and intense pangs of hunger assailed him. In spite of the shooting pains in his skull, he raised his voice in a mighty bellow.

"Ho, guards! Would you let a man perish of hunger and thirst? Fetch food and drink! What cursed nook of Hell is this?"

With a patter of footsteps and jingle of keys, a paunchy bearded jailer appeared on the other side of the iron grille that barret the door of the cell. "So the Western dog has awakened! Know that these are the dungeons of King Yezdigerd's palace at Aghrapur. Here is food and water. You will need to fill your belly to appreciate the cordial reception the king has prepared for you."

Thrusting a loaf and a small jug through the bars, the jailer went away, his cackling laughter resounding hollowly in the corridor. The famished Cimmerian flung himself on the food and drink. He munched great hunks of the stale loaf and washed them down with gulps of water.

He pondered his predicament. He was in the hands of his most implacable enemy. In the olden days King

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Yezdigerd had offered fabulous rewards for Conan's head. Many had been the attempts on Conan. But the tenacious hatred in Yezdigerd's heart had not slackened even when his foe had won power as king of far Aquilonia. Now, by a woman's devious schemes, Conan was at last at the mercy of his merciless antagonist. Any ordinary man would have been daunted by the terrible prospect.

Not so Conan! Accepting things as they were, his fertile mind was already tryng and discarding plans of winning to freedom and turning the tables on his vengeful captor. His eyes narrowed as the clank of footsteps sounded in the corridor.

At a harsh word of command the steps halted. Through the grille Conan could discern a half-score of guardsmen, gilt-worked mail a-shimmer in the torchlight, curved swords in their hands. Two bore heavy bows at the ready. A tall massive officer stood forward. Conan recognized Ardashir, who spoke in a sharp cutting voice.

"Shapur and Vardan! Truss the barbarian securely and sling a noose about his neck! Archers! Stand by to prevent any trick!"

The two soldiers stepped forward to carry out the order. One bore a log of wood six feet long and several inches thick, while the other carried a stout rope. Ardashir addressed himself to the Cimmerian. His eyes glowed with malevolence and his fingers twitched with eagerness to attack Conan, but he himself in check with the iron self-control of a well-trained officer. He hissed:

"One false move, barbarian dog, and your heart shall know the marksmanship of my archers! I should dearly love to slay you myself, but you are the king's own meat."

Conan's chill blue eyes regarded the maddened officer without emotion as the soldiers placed the log across his shoulders and bound his arms to it. Without apparent effort, Conan tensed his huge arm-muscles, so that the rope was stretched to its greatest tautness at the moment of tying. The jailer then unlocked Conan's fetters. Conan rumbled:

"You Turanian dogs will get what you deserve sooner or later. You will see."

Ardashir's face twitched in fury as he spat back: "And you will get yours, you red-handed rogue! No torture devised by human brains will be too cruel when the royal executioners set to work upon you. But enough of this gabble. Follow me, your majesty of maggoty Aquilonia!"

At a gesture to the guardsmen, the little company marched along the dark corridors. The bound barbarian

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walked in their midst, bearing the log across his shoulders. Conan was quite unruffled. He was like a trapped wolf, alert and constantly looking for a chance to reverse the situation. He did not waste thought on the terrible odds against him, or on futile recriminations against his foes, or on self-reproach for the moment's lapse in vigilance that resulted in his capture. His whole mind and nervous system were concentrated on what to do next.

Winding stone staircases led upward. As nobody had blindfolded Conan, his keen eyes took in every detail. The dungeons of the royal palace were far below ground-level. There were several floors to pass.

Twice Conan glimpsed the outside world as they passed window-slits. The darkling sky showed that the time was either dawn or dusk. Now he understood the mystifying murmur of surf which had reached his ears. The palace was built on the outskirts of Aghrapur, on a crag overlooking the Sea of Vilayet. The dungeons were carved out of the heart of the rock whose sheer face ended in the lapping waves below. That was why Conan could see the sky through the window-slits, though they had not yet reached the lower floors of the palace itself.

The size of the palace was amazing. The party passed through endless rooms with fountains and jeweled vases. Now their steps echoed from arching walls; now they were muffled by rich rugs and hangings. Corseleted soldiers stood like statues everywhere.

The party halted before two gigantic gold-worked doors. Fully fifty feet high they towered, their upper parts disappearing in the gloom. Mysterious arabesques curled their snaky course across the surfaces of the doors, on which the dragons, heroes, and wizards of Hyrkanian legend were depicted. Ardashir stepped forward and struck the golden plates a ringing blow with the hilt of his scimitar.

In response, the immense doors opened slowly. The low murmur of a great assembly of people reached Conan's ears.

The throne-room was vaster than anything Conan had ever seen, from the sumptuous state chambers of Ophir and Nemedia to the smoky, timber-roofed halls of Asgard and Vanaheim. Giant pillars of marble reared lofty columns towards a roof that seemed as distant as the sky. The profusion of cressets, lamps, and candelabra illuminated costly drapes, paintings, and hangings. Behind the throne rose windows of stained glass, closed against the fall of night.

A glittering host filled the

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hall. Fully a thousand must have assembled there. There were Nemedians in jupons, trunk-hose, and great leather boots; Ophireans in billowing cloaks; stocky black-bearded Shemites in silken robes; renegade Zuagirs from the desert; Vendhyans in bulging turbans and gauzy robes; barbarically-clad emissaries from the black kingdoms to the far southwest. Even a lone yellow-haired warrior from the Far North, clad in a somber black tunic, stared sullenly before him, his powerful hands gripping the hilt of a heavy longsword that rested before him with the chape of its scabbard on the floor.

Some had come here to escape the wrath of their own rulers, some as informers and traitors against the lands of their birth, and some as envoys.

The blare of golden trumpets rang across the huge hall. An avenue opened through the milling mass, and Conan's little group set itself again in motion.

Conan was afire with curiosity. Though he had fought this Eastern despot many years ago on several occasions—as war-chief of the Zuagirs, as admiral of the Vilayet pirates, as leader of the Himelian hillmen, and as hetman of the *kozaki*—he had never yet seen his implacable foe in person. He kept his eyes full on the figure on the golden throne as he approached it.

So it came about that he did not notice the widening of the blond giant's gray eyes in sudden recognition. The powerful knuckles whitened as the enigmatic gaze intently followed the towering figure of the Cimmerian on his way towards the dais.

King Yezdigerd was a swarthy giant of a man with a short black beard and a thin cruel mouth. Although the debauchery of the Turanian court had wrought pouches under his glittering eyes, and lines criss-crossed his stern and gloomy features ten years too early, his hard-muscled, powerful body bore witness that self-indulgence had not sapped his immense vitality.

A brilliant strategist and an insatiable plunderer, Yezdigerd had more than doubled the size of the kingom inherited from his weak predecessor Yildiz. He had wrung tribute from the city-states of Brythunia and eastern Shem. His gleaming horsemen had beaten the armies of such distant nations as Stygia and Hyperborea. The crafty king of Zamora, Mithridates, had been shorn of border provinces and had kept his throne only at the price of groveling before his conqueror.

Arrayed in a splendor of silk and cloth-of-gold, the king lolled on the shining

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throne with the deceptive ease of a resting panther.

At his right sat a woman. Conan felt his blood run hot with recognition. Thanara! A diamond-studded diadem glittered in her lustrous black hair. Her eyes fastened triumphantly on the trussed and weaponless figure of her captive. She joined in the laughter of the courtiers round the throne at some grim jest uttered by the king.

The detail halted before the throne. Yezdigerd's eyes blazed with triumphant glee. At last he held in his power the man who had slaughtered his soldiers, burnt his cities, and scuttled his ships. The lust for vengeance churned up within him, but he held himself in check while the guardsmen knelt and touched their foreheads to the marble floor.

Conan made no obeisance. His blue eyes aflame with icy fire, he stood still and upright, clashing with the Turanian king in a battle of looks. Unclad, as he was, he still commanded the attention of all by the aura of power that radiated from him. The rumor of his fabulous exploits was whispered back and forth among the members of the glittering throng.

Sensing the strain upon the rope he held, Ardashir looked up from his kneeling posture. Black rage seethed in his face as he saw the disdain of the Cimmerian for court etiquette. He tugged viciously at the rope, tightening the noose about Conan's neck. Conan stood steady as a rock. The massive muscles of his bull-neck swelled in ridges against the pressure of the rope. Then he suddenly bent forward and straightened up again, pulling the rope backwards. Ardashir was jerked off his knees and sprawled with a clatter of gear on the marble.

"I pay homage to no Hyrkanian dog!" Conan's roar was like a peal of thunder. "You wage your wars with the help of women. Can you handle a sword yourself? I'll show you how a real man fights!"

During his short speech, Conan relaxed the taut muscles of his arms, so that the rope binding them went slack. By stretching, he got the tips of his left fingers around one end of the log on his back. With a quick jerk he slipped his right arm out of the loose coils of rope and brought the log around in front of him. Then he swiftly freed his left arm.

Ardashir scrambled up and lunged towards him, drawing his scimitar. Conan whipped the end of the log around with a thud against the Turanian's helmet. The officer was hurled across the floor, his body spinning like that of a thrown doll.

For a split second, everybody stood unmoving, struck

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still by this seemingly magical feat. With the fighting instinct of the barbarian, Conan took instant advantage of this pause. One end of the log shot out and caught a guardsman in the face. The man flew over backwards, his face a mere smear of blood and broken bones. Then Conan whirled and threw the log into the nearest group of guards on the other side of him, even as they started to rise and drew their weapons. The men were bowled over in a clattering heap.

Lithe and quick as a leopard, Conan bounded forward, snatching up the scimitar that Ardashir had dropped when knocked unconscious. A couple of courtiers tried to bar the Cimmerian's way at the foot of King Yezdigerd's dais, but he easily cut his path through them, slashing and thrusting. He bounded up the steps of the dais.

As he came, the king rose to meet him, sweeping out his own scimitar. The jewels in its hilt flashed as Yezdigerd brought the blade up to parry a terrific downright cut that Conan aimed at his head. Such was the force of the blow that the king's sword snapped. Conan's blade cut through the many folds of the snow-white turban, cleaving the spray of bird-of-paradise feathers that rose from the front of it and denting the steel cap that Yesdigerd wore beneath.

Though the blow failed to split the king's skull as Conan intended, it threw the Turanian backwards, stunned. Yezdigerd fell back over the arm of his throne and overset the gleaming chair. King and throne rolled off the dais, down the steps on the other side, and into a knot of onrushing guardsmen, spoiling their charge.

Conan, beside himself with battle-lust, would have bounded after the king to finish him off. But loyal arms dragged Yezdigerd out of the press, and from all sides sword-blades and spear-points pressed in upon the unprotected Cimmerian.

Conan's scimitar wove a lethal net of steel around him. He surpassed himself in brilliant swordsmanship. Despite his stay in the dungeon and the after-effects of the drug he had inhaled, he was fired with vitality.

A quick slash sent an antagonist tumbling backwards with his entrails spilling out; a lightning thrust burst through mail-links into a Turanian heart. For an instant, raging like a mad elephant about the dais, he cleared it of soldiers and courtiers except for those who lay in a tangle about his feet.

Only the lady Thanara remained, sitting petrified in her chair. With a grating laugh, Conan tore the glittering diadem from her hair and flung her into the throng

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that milled about the platform.

Soldiers now advanced grimly from all sides, their spearheads and sword-blades forming a bristling hedge in front of an ordered line of shields. Behind them, archers nocked their shafts.

Conan flexed his muscles, swung his scimitar, and gave a booming laugh. Blood ran down his naked hide from superficial cuts in scalp, arm, chest, and leg. Surrounded and unarmored, not even his strength and speed could save him from the thrust of many keen blades all at once. The prospect of death did not trouble him; he only hoped to take as many foes as he could into the darkness with him.

Suddenly there came the clash of steel, the spurt of blood, and the icy gleam of a northern longsword. A giant figure hewed its way through the armored lines, leaving three blood-spattered corpses on the floor. With a mighty bound, the fair-haired Northerner leaped to the dais. In his left arm he cradled a couple of heavy round objects—bucklers of bronze and leather picked up from the floor where the victims of Conan's first outburst had dropped them.

"Catch this!" cried the newcomer, tossing one of the shields to Conan. Their glances met and locked. Conan cried:

"Rolf! What do you here, old polar bear?"

"I will tell you later," growled the Northerner, grasping the handle of the other buckler. "If we live, that is. If not, I am prepared to fight and die with you."

The unexpected advent of this formidable ally raised Conan's spirits even higher.

"Rush in, jackals," he taunted, waving his blood-stained scimitar. "Who will be the next to consign his soul to Hell?"

The steel-sheathed ranks of the Turanian soldiery had halted, forming a square about the dais. The two giant barbarians stood back to back, one black-haired and almost naked, the other blond and clad in somber black.

"Archers!" cried an officer directing the Turanian troopers. "Spread out, so the shafts shall strike from all sides."

"They have us," growled Rolf. "Had we but stout coats of Asgardean mail... Ah, well, it was fun while it lasted."

"Not quite," said Conan. "See you that row of windows? Here is my plan..."

He whispered a few quick words to his comrade, who nodded. The two giants sprang forward, their blades flickering with the speed of striking snakes. Two guardsmen sank to the floor in their blood, and the others shrank back momentarily from the

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fury of the mad onslaught.

"Follow me, Rolf! We will fool these dogs yet!" barked the Cimmerian, striking right and left.

The swords of the barbarians cleared a bloody avenue. The big northerner wheeled, thrusting and cutting, his sword cutting down the Turanians like wheat-stalks before the scythe as he guarded Conan's back. As Conan rushed forward, Rolf followed in his wake, his sword widening the bloody path opened by the Cimmerian. His booming bass was casting forth the ringing tones of old Northern battlesongs, and the gleam of the berserk was in his gaze.

Turanian swords and spears sought their blood, but glanced harmlessly from the shields as the pantherish speed of the barbarians blurred the eyes of their adversaries. Conan bled from a score of wounds and Rolf's garb was in tatters, but the bodies heaped upon the floor bespoke the violence of their attack.

They put their backs to one of the large windows. For a few seconds both barbarians exploded into maniacal fury, laying about them with blood-crusted blades and clearing a space of several feet around them. The massed soldiers shrank back for a moment. It seemed to their superstitious minds as if these were not men but invincible ogres, hard as steel, risen from the darker realms to wreak terrible vengeance.

Conan utilized this moment with lightening-like speed. The stained glass of the window shattered into thousands of gleaming many-colored shards under blows from his scimitar that tore a great gap in the leaded pane. Hurling their swords and shields into the faces of their foes, the Cimmerian and the Northerner sprang through in headlong dives towards the sea two hundred feet below. A taunting laugh lingered behind them in the air as the guardsmen closed in.

"Archers! An archer, quickly, to have at them!" The commanding officer's voice was shrill with desperation. Five men stood forward, each armed with the powerful double-curved Hyrkanian warbow. The window-niche was cleared, and soon the twang of cords was heard. Then one of the bowmen shrugged his shoulders and turned to the officer.

"The range is too great in this treacherous moonlight. We cannot even discern their heads, and probably they are swimming under water most of the time. The task is beyond us."

Glaring, the general swung about and hurried to the king's chamber. Yezdigerd had recovered from his shock. The only sign of damage was a small bandage round his

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forehead, partly covered by his turban. The terse account of the incidents elapsed was interrupted by the crash of the king's fist on the table, spilling vases and wine-jugs to the floor.

"You have dared to fail! Are my soldiers sucklings, that they cannot lay two men low? Every tenth man among the guards shall die in the morning, to bolster the courage of the rest!"

He continued in a lower voice: "See that two war-galleys are outfitted at once. The barbarians will surely try to steal a boat and make their way across the sea. We shall overtake them. See that the ships are well-provisioned and manned by my best seamen and soldiers. When I have caught these dogs, they shall suffer the agonies of a thousand deaths in the torture-chambers of Aghrapur."

He laughed, animated by the grisly prospect, and gestured imperiously to his general. The latter hurried out, threading his way through the throng in the courtroom to carry out his lord's commands.

Khosru the fisherman sat patiently on the gunwale of his sloop, mending a net which had been broken by the thrashing of a giant sturgeon that afternoon. He cursed his misfortune, for this was a fine net. It had cost him two pieces of gold and the promise of fifty pounds of fish to the Shemite merchant whom he had bought it from. But what could the poor starving fisherman do? He must have nets to get his living from the sea.

Aye, if those were the only things necessary for him and his family! But he must also strain and work to meet the taxes imposed by the king. He looked up in venomous, furtive hatred at the palace, limned against the moonlit sky. The king's tax-gatherers had supple whips and no compunction about using them. Welts and old scars on Khosru's back told of wrongs suffered when the shoals were empty of fish.

Suddenly the sloop heaved, almost unseating him. Khosru sprang up, his eyes starting from their sockets in terror. A huge almost-naked man was climbing aboard, his black square-cut hair disordered and dripping. He seemed to Khosru like some demon of the sea, an evil merman, come up from unknown deeps to blast his soul and devour his body.

For a moment the apparition simply sat on a thwart, breathing in deep gasps. Then it spoke in Hyrkanian, though with a barbarious accent. Khosru's terror increased as another figure, a huge black-clad golden-haired man with a broad-bladed dagger at his belt, followed the first over the gunwale.

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"Fear not, sailor!" boomed the black-haired giant. "We don't want your blood, only your ship." He drew a glittering diadem from the waistband of his loin-cloth and held it out. "Here is payment enough and more. You can buy ten such craft as this one with it. Agreed—or—?"

He flexed his thick fingers suggestively. Khosru, his head whirling, nodded and snatched the diadem. With speed of a frightened mouse he scuttled into the dinghy moored to the stern of the sloop and rowed away at desperate speed.

His strange customers lost no time. The sail went swiftly up and billowed in the freshening breeze. The trim craft gathered speed as it steered out towards the east.

4. THE SEA OF BLOOD.

The wind blew hard. Salty spray was tossed from the waves by the howling gusts. Conan the Cimmerian expanded his mighty chest in deep, joyous breaths, relishing the feel of freedom. Many memories crowded his mind from the earlier days when he, as chief of the pirates of Vilayet, had swept the sea with dripping sword-blades and laid the Turanian seaports in smoking ruins.

Vilayet was still a Hyrkanian sea, dominated by the Turanian navy's swift war-galleys. Trade was carried on to some extent by daring merchants from the smaller countries on the northeastern shore, but a merchantman's way across the turbulent waves was fraught with peril. No state of war was needed for a Turanian captain to board, plunder, and scuttle a foreign vessel if it pleased him. The excuse was simply "infringement upon the interests of the Lord of the Turanian Empire."

Besides the greedy Turanian navy, there lurked another danger quite as great: the pirates!

A motley horde of escaped slaves, criminals, freebooters, and wandering adventurers, all with a common lust for gold and a common disregard for human life, infested the waters of this huge inland sea, making even Turanian shipping a hazardous venture.

Internal strife often crippled their power, to the satisfaction of the king of Turan, until there came along them a strange barbarian from the West, with blue eyes and raven hair. Conan swept aside their quarreling captains and took the reins of leadership in his own hands. He smiled in recollection of those days, when his name was a curse in Vilayet harbors, and prayers and incantations were chanted against him in the temples of the seaports.

The sloop's sharp bow cut the water like a scimitar, and her single sail billowed taut-

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ly before the wind. Aghrapur had been astern for nearly twenty hours. Conan guessed their speed to be greater than that of Turanian warships. Should the breeze die, however, they would have a problem. They could never hope to equal the speed of a galley, propelled by hard-driven slave rowers, by means of their own puny sweeps. But the wind showed no sign of slackening, and Rolf's capable hand guided the small vessel before it so as to extract the last ounce of sail-power from it.

Rolf was telling the long tale of the wanderings and adventures that had led him to Aghrapur. "...so here I am, a fugitive from my native Asgard and from Turan both."

"Why did you join me?" asked Conan. "You were comfortably off at the Turanian court."

Rolf looked offended. "Did you think I had forgotten the time you saved my life, in that battle with the Hyperboreans in the Graaskal Mountains?"

Conan grinned. "So I did, didn't I? After so many battles, I had forgotten myself." He shaded his eyes and looked at the unbroken blue line of the horizon. "I doubt not that at least a couple of Yezdigerd's war-galleys are on our heels," he said grimly. "The rascal must be hot for vengeance. I doubt he will soon forget how thoroughly we pulled his beard."

"True," rumbled Rolf. "I hope this fine wind keeps up, or we shall soon be at grips with his galleys."

Conan's active mind was already dwelling on another topic. "In my days with the Red Brotherhood," he mused, "this area was the surest one for a sweep to catch a fat merchantman from Sultanapur or Khawarizm. Some of the pirate ships should be nearby."

He stiffened like a lion sighting its prey and out an arm to starboard.

"Rolf, we have company! Those yellow sails can mean but one thing: a pirate. We might as well drop our sail and await them; they could overtake us in a half-hour if they wished!"

Eyes fixed on the oncoming vessels, he waited, outwordly stolid and unmoved.

Conan drank in the measured thump of oars in their locks, the creak of spars, the shouts of boatswains, and the smell of tar with gusto. Half a cable's length away a slim sailing-galley, its yellow sail ablaze in the afternoon sun, hove to. Conan and Rolf rowed towards the pirate craft.

The gunwale was lined with faces. Many were swathed in colorful head-cloths. Some favored the eastern turban; others bore helmets of steel or bronze. A few had pates

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shaven and bare except for a scalp-lock. Cold cruel eyes scrutinized the two strangers in the sloop.

The small craft bumped against the side of the bigger vessel. A rope was lowered. Hand over hand, Conan and Rolf climbed with the agility of practiced seamen. Clearing the gunwale, they found themselves in the center of a half-circle of curious pirates, all shouting queries at once. Among them Conan recognized several who had followed him in former days. He snarled:

"Dogs, don't you know me? Is your memory so short that you you must be reminded of my name, or have your eyes grown dim with age?"

Several men in the throng had drawn back, blanching from the shock of recognition. One, white-faced, rasped:

"A ghost, by Tarim! Erlik preserve us! It is our old admiral, come back from his grave to haunt us!" Veteran though he was, the grizzled pirate was obviously terrified as he pointed at Conan. "You perished many years ago, when the vampires of the Colchian Mountains assailed your crew as they fled from the Turanians after taking vengeance on Artaban of Shahpur. Begone, spirit, or we shall all be doomed!"

Conan gave a gusty laugh. He plucked Rolf's dagger from its sheath and hurled it to the deck so that the point was driven inches deep into the planking. Then he pulled the weapon out.

"Have you taken leave of your senses, Artus?" he roared. "Could a ghost make that nick in the deck? Come, man, I am as alive as the lot of you and, if you believe me not, I'll crack a few heads to prove it! I escaped both the vampires and the Turanians, and what befell me after that is no concern of yours. Do you know me now?"

Conan's old followers now joyfully milled about the towering Cimmerian to shake his hand and clap his back. Men who had never seen him before crowded with the others, fired with curiosity about a man whose name was legendary and whose fantastic exploits were still told by the wine-kegs on still evenings.

Suddenly a sharp voice sheared through the clamor: "Avast, there! What's going on? Who are they? I told you to fetch them to me as soon as they were picked up!"

A tall man, wearing a light mailshirt, stood on the bridge, one first banging the rails. A badly-healed scar from eye to chin disfigured his long narrow face.

"It is Conan, Captain!" cried old Artus, the shipmaster. "Our old admiral has returned!"

The captain's close-set eyes

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narrowed as his own sight sought confirmation of the oldster's words. He opened his mouth to speak, but Conan beat him to it.

"Are you not glad to see me, Yanak? Remember how I kicked you out of the fleet for hoarding spoils that belonged to all? How have you managed to trick your way to a captaincy? Ill days must have dawned for the Brotherhood!"

Yanak spat back: "For that, barbarian, I will have you hung by the heels and roasted over the ship's fire! I am captain and give the orders here!"

"That may be," retorted Conan. "But I am still a member of the Brotherhood." He looked challengingly around, and nobody chose to deny his assertion. "I claim a right according to the articles. The right of any member of the Brotherhood to fight the captain of a ship for the captaincy in a captain's duel."

He tossed up the dagger he had borrowed from Rolf and caught it again. It was a formidable weapon with a broad foot-long blade, but still no sword.

The crew murmured, for all that in such a duel Conan would have to fight with whatever weapon he had with him at the time, while Yanak could choose what weapon he pleased.

"This is madness, Conan!" Artus plucked the Cimmerian's elbow. "Yanak will cut you to pieces. We'll depose him instead and choose you for captain. All your old followers are on your side."

Conan shook his head and rumbled: "Half the crew don't know me and would oppose such a move. The men would be split into factions and our strength would be weakened. No, it must be done the traditional way."

Several crewmen were already clearing a space around the mast. Yanak approached, a gleeful smile on his scarred face as his hands tested the supple strength of a keen straight sword.

Conan gripped his dagger firmly and strode towards the mast. A large circle six yards in diameter was already drawn in charcoal on the deck around the mast The rules of the fight were simple. The antagonists were to fight inside the circle. Any trick was allowed. The fight would be to the death, or until one of the duellists was so badly hurt he could not go on. In that case he would simply be flung overboard anyway. If one of the fighters stepped out of the circle, the onlookers would at once thrust him back in.

The instant Conan entered the circle, Yanak bounded forward, cleaving the air with a whistling stroke. But the barbarian was too old a hand to be surprised. He

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leaped sideways, and Yanak was saved from a dagger-thrust in his side only by twisting his body aside at the last moment. After that, he moved more warily, although he was clearly at an advantage. Now and then he made a sudden attack, shouting and cursing, but the silent Cimmerian parried or evaded the blows with effortless ease and continued to circle around the mast.

Then Yanak tried a trick. Conan and he were temporarily on the same side of the mast. With all the power of his knotted leg-muscles, the captain sprang upwards in a mighty leap, at the same time smiting downward at the Cimmerian's bare head.

But Conan's instinct triggered his lightning-fast responses. Instead of retreating, he sprang forward. Yanak's blade whistled harmlessly down behind the barbarian's back as Conan buried his knife to the hilt in his foe's abdomen, shearing through the light mail-links with the immense force of his thrust. The pirate fell to the deck, cursing and gagging on blood. Conan stooped and lifted him up. With a mighty heave, he flung the corpse over the heads of the crew into the sea. Picking up the fallen sword, he swept their ranks with a cold gaze.

"Now who is captain, my lads?"

The shouts of "Conan!" would have satisfied any doubter. Conan drank in the heavy satisfaction of his new-won power. Then his thunderous voice bellowed them to silence.

"To the sails and oars, lubbers! A man to the masthead as lookout! I have Yezdigerd himself hot on my trail!"

Taken aback by the announcement that their arch-enemy was abroad, the crew's idolatrous confidence in Conan was yet so strong as to wash away all misgivings. Many remembered how the Cimmerian had fought and tricked his way out of seemingly impossible odds.

Conan sprang to the bridge in one mighty leap, shouting: "Set sail! Course southeast!"

Men hauled at lines, voicing lusty sea-songs. Yellow canvas spread before the breeze. The pirate at the helm strained with knotted muscles at the steering-oar, bringing the slim vessel about. She fled eastward before the wind, fleet as the deer of the moorlands.

"So you think I'm mad, Artus? By Crom, I hope Yezdigerd thinks so too!"

Conan's hearty laughter resounded in the well-appointed cabin as he sprawled in a chair, a tumber of wine in his hand. Conan had casually possessed himself of the wardrobe of his predecessor and clad himself in the

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colorful garb of a Vilayet pirate: scarlet breeches, flaring sea-boots, a yellow shirt of fine Vendhyan silk with wide sleeves, and a wide varicolored sash around his waist. The costume was topped off by a red cloth around his head.

Together with Rolf, Artus the shipmaster lounged in Conan's company while the galley swiftly cleaved with waters of the inland sea. With clouded brow, he set his goblet on the table.

"No, Conan, I know you too well. But this seems a hare-brained scheme, dashing straight into the jaws of the Turanian. The men are drunk with confidence and do not think of the fact that Yezigerd will bring at least two large war-galleys. I am old and sober enough to stop and ponder. What are your intentions?"

With sudden gravity, Conan rose and went to a gilded wooden cupboard. Opening it, he brought out a roll of parchment. This he spread upon the table. It was a chart of the waters they were now sailing.

"Here is our position. Yezdigerd has been four days on his way from Aghrapur. The Turanian ships are running free. With their mean speed, I compute them to be somewhere in this area." (He pointed to a spot on the chart.) "With our present course and speed, we shall rendezvous with Yezdigerd somewhere off the Zhurazi Archipelago."

"The Zhurazi, eh?" muttered Artus. "Those are dangerous waters. The charts show no soundings. That cursed cluster is shunned by sane men. Some say it is haunted by demons and monsters from the darker realms and that you are lost if you set foot on its shores."

"Lost, hell!" rumbled Conan. "I once lived on the north main island for a fortnight after shipwreck. There was a tribe of yellow savages dwelling among the crags, and I had the devil of a time stopping them from sacrificing me to their lizard-god!"

Thus lightly he dismissed the hair-raising drama played out on these islands years before. The pantherish Cimmerian had not only stayed alive in a land of hostile people, but also had slain the monster out of forgotten ages that terrorized the inhabitants.

He stood for a while in silence, regarding the chart. Then, with a sudden gesture, he swept it off the table and swung about to face his friends.

"Right you are, Artus. There are no soundings on this chart. Turanian, isn't it? Drawn by the king's own surveyors in Aghrapur—the very type of map our bloodthirsty pursuer will have. That is our advantage."

And however they pressed

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him, he would not explain further.

Muscles played on the sweating backs of the slaves at the oars. The blades rose and fell in steady rhythm, speeding the huge war-vessel over the waves. The burly slave-master strode the catwalk with his braided whip, his skin gleaming with sweat and oil. Now and then the whiplash uncurled like a striking cobra, to hiss out and mark the back of a faltering oarsman.

The king took his ease on a silken couch on the poop, shaded by an awning and sipping wine from a golden beaker. On a similar bed by his side lounged the lady Thanara.

The king was sunk in one of his spells of gloom. His gaze was brooding and somber, as he slowly swirled the pale-yellow liquid in the golden bowl. He said:

"Evil powers aid the Cimmerian devil! He must have stolen a boat immediately upon his escape. My cursed admirals need half a day to put my flagship to sea, and then the devils that ruin human patience have turned the wind against us. We move like snails."

"Better than he can do, though," said Thanara, looking lazily at the monarch from under long eyelashes. "His puny oars will avail him little in this wind. Every stroke of the club on the block lessens his head-start. Be patient, my lord! Erlik will deliver the barbarian into our hands."

"My henchmen have often thought so, yet that scoundrel has tricked his way out of every trap. Now for once I am the hunter! By the beard of my father Yildiz, there will be a reckoning!" Yezdigerd's voice became eager and his eyes filled with new energy. He shaded his face and looked out over the glittering waters.

He made a quick gesture. The admiral hurried forward, the gilded scales of his mail winking in the sunlight.

"I see land, Uthghiz. Have we veered from our course?" said the king.

The admiral, knowing his sovreign's irascible temper, quickly unfolded a map and pointed.

"That, my lord, is the Zhurazi Archipelago. The Cimmerian has probably landed there for food and water. I intend to scan the coast for signs of his boat."

"You may be right. But keep every man alert. How close can you sail?"

"These are unknown waters, my lord. The conditions of life on the islands are shrouded in superstition. Horrible tales are told of fiendish monsters haunting the crags. We dare not go too close lest we strike unseen rocks."

The king sank back on his

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gilded couch, muttering, but the yedka continued to scan the ragged coastline. Had her eyes deceived her? Was that a sail she glimpsed before it disappeared behind a rocky islet on the fringe of the cluster? The Turanian ships drew closer with every oar-stroke.

She stiffened and pointed. The sail had reappeared.

"Look, my lord!" she cried. "Yonder is a prize for your ships! A pirate! We have surprised them!"

The yedka was not the only one who spied the corsair. Swift orders were shouted. The crew prepared for battle, while signals were run up to warn the sister vessel to do likewise.

The overseers moved among the benches to check the fetters chaining the rowers. Stacks of arms were readied by the mast, and the ship's soldiery ran to their stations. Archers climbed into the rigging to suitable points of vantage, while groups of burly seamen, armed with grapnels, stood by at the gunwales.

Though Conan's sharp eyes could discern the details of these preparations, he knew that they began as soon as he let his ship be sighted. The pirate ship was long since ready for battle. Despite the heavy odds against the pirate crew, all trusted their barbaric captain implicity. Men who had sailed with Conan years ago told fantastic tales about former sea-fights and the ingenious ways the Cimmerian had turned the tables on his foes.

"Prepare to go about!" The sharp voice of their captain cut like steel through the din.

The order was a shock to the crew. Here they were, ready for the attack, with the greatest captain in the world to lead them—and what did this captain do? Prepare to run like a rabbit! Bewildered, they went half-heartedly to their chores. Conan noticed their listlessness and snarled:

"Be swift, you mangy rascals, or I'll have your backs raw under the lash! Do you think I'm fool enough to fight two war-galleys, each with twice my strength, on the open sea, when I have a better plan? Do not worry, lubbers, we shall have a feasting of swords that songs will be written about. Now go to it!"

Fired with new enthusiasm, the men sprang into the rigging. Soon the ship was speeding towards the inner parts of the Zhurazi Archipelago.

The Zhurazi Archipelago is made of two large islands surrounded by a great number of smaller isles. The strait between the two main islands is a long narrow channel, and for this Conan

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guided his ship. There was grim expectation in his mien as he viewed the Turanian galleys following astern, their oars laboring with all the power that could be wrung from the slaves.

King Yezdigerd paced the poop, armed in silvered Turanian mail and a gold-spired helmet. He bore a round emblazoned shield on his left arm; a long scimitar hung by his side. The cruel and gloomy Turanian monarch was also a fierce and intrepid warrior who loved to take part in a good fight in person.

"See how the yellow hyenas flee!" he cried. "Will they play games with us? They will lose the wind among the islands, and then our oars will make them easy prey. Faster!"

Meanwhile the admiral conferred in low tones with the shipmaster, who argued his point with many gestures and headshakings. The admiral, looking doubtful, went back up to the poop. He said:

"Your majesty, these waters are unsounded. We have no charts we can trust, and the shipmaster fears we shall ground. I suggest we circle the island and catch the corsair in open sea."

Yezdigerd's voice swept aside the misgivings of his admiral with a sweeping gesture.

"I told you the rascal will be an easy prey in the lee of the islands. Let the whips be plied to bring us every ounce of speed. We shall snap our jaws about the pirate soon enough!"

The king seemed to have reason for his expectations. The slender corsair was now barely halfway through the strait, making laborious headway. The Turanians, seeing their victim as good as caught, shouted with glee.

Dismay reigned among the pirate crew. Their progress was slow, and the Hyrkanian ships were closing in with every stroke. Rolf stood silent, with the taciturnity of the northern barbarian, but Artus pleaded with his captain to make some move to evade the impending doom.

"Captain, the Hyrkanians will reach us long before we emerge! We cannot maneuver in this narrow way, and their rams will splinter us like an eggshell. Could we not warp her ashore with the boats? We might put up a fight in the jungle. Tarim! We must do something!"

Conan, his calm unruffled, pointed at the oncoming war-galleys. In the lead came the *Scimitar* with white water boiling up around her bow and her ten-foot bronze ram. She seemed a very angel of doom, descending in swift anger upon the wrongdoer. Close behind followed her sister.

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"A pretty sight, by Ishtar," said Conan calmly. "Good speed, too. The slave-drivers must be plying their whips with vigor."

His voice changed its tone from light banter to stern efficiency. "What are our soundings now?"

"Five fathoms, captain, and slowly increasing. We have passed the throat of the shallows. A wonder we did not scrape our bottom off!"

"Good! I knew we should get through. Now look at our pursuers!"

The *Scimitar*, bearing down upon her prey at full speed, suddenly stopped dead. A cracking of timbers and snapping of cordage resounded between the islands. Cries of dimay rent the air as the mast snapped off at the base and toppled, shrouding the decks in folds of canvas. The oars began backing to get her off, but her speed at the time of grounding had been too great. The unseen sandbank held her fast like a clutching octopus.

The other galley was a little more fortunate. When the leading vessel struck, her captain promptly ordered the oars to back water. But the oars were unevenly applied in the confusion and the galley veered to port towards the shore. She was saved from the cliffs only by another sandbank, into which she plowed deeply. Boats were launched and lines paid out to prepare for the arduous task of warping her afloat.

The throng on the desk of the corsair howled, shook their weapons, and made uncomplimentary gestures at the Turanians. They cheered Conan, and even the pessimistic shipmaster voiced his frank esteem.

"Those galleys will be days in getting afloat," said Artus. "I doubt the bigger one will ever sail again; her bottom must be half stove in.

"So, captain, whither do we sail? Khoraf, where the slavers put in with the fairest women of the South? Rhamdan, where the great caravan road ends?"

Conan's voice was tinged with scorn as he swept the throng with his ice-blue glance. "We have Turanian ships here, my friends. We have not escaped Yezdigerd; we have caught him in a trap! I promised you a feasting of swords. You shall have it." He paused, looking upward. "The wind freshens; we are coming out of lee. Set a course to round the larboard island!"

Eager hands sprag to the lines as all realized the full genius of Conan's planning.

King Yezdigerd paced the poop of his shattered flagship in blazing anger. Some of it he vented upon the seaman at the sounding-post and the steersman, by having both

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beheaded forthwith. There was no immediate danger of sinking, for the hull had settled firmly upon the reef. But the hold had quickly filled with water from many sprung seams, indicating that the ship could probably never be saved. And the trick played upon the king by the escaping pirate infuriated his always irascible temper.

"I will hunt that dog to the ends of the earth!" he shouted. "The whole thing smacks of that devil Conan. I'll warrant he is aboard. Will Khogar never get his cursed tub afloat?"

Thus he raged while work progressed on the *Khoralian Star*. As the long day wore on, the crews slowly coaxed the ship off the sandbank by inches, by tugging and heaving with the ships' boats. The captain of the *Star* was deeply preoccupied with directing this work when his attention was drawn by the warning cry of the lookout.

Rounding the point, her yellow sail billowing majestically, came the ship they had expected to be in full flight. Her bulwarks and shrouds were lined with eager corsairs. Faintly, their mocking challenges reached the Turanians' ears, like the cries of faraway demons in Hell.

Straight for the helpless *Khoralian Star* she bore like a striking eagle. She rammed a ship's boat, cutting it in two and sending splinters and bodies flying. Then she shortened her sail, made a quick turn, and in an instant lay board and board with her prey. Grappling hooks bit into Turanian wood, and a rain of arrows preceded the yelling, murderous host that surged over the gunwales.

The corsairs swept the lower deck, littering the planks with corpses. But they were checked by a blast of arrows from the poop, where the Turanian soldiery were drawn up behind a bristling hedge of spears. Only a moment they checked their attack. Then they swept on irresistibly.

The Turanians could not stand against these hardened fighters, led by the ferocious Cimmerian. A vicious swipe of Conan's broadsword opened a breach in the spear-hedge.

The captain, knowing that his only chance of saving his ship lay in slaying the pirate leader, sprang to meet Conan. Their blades clashed in a circular dance of steel. But the Turanian could not master the sword-craft of Conan, veteran from a thousand battlefields. The sharp edge of the Turanian's yataghan shaved a raven lock from the Cimmerian's ducking head; then the heavy broadsword smashed into the captain's mailed side. Khogar sank down dying, his rib-cage caved in.

The fight went out of the Turanian soldiery as their captain fell. Cries for quarter

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were heard. The men flung down their arms in heaps.

Conan surveyed the scene with grim satisfaction. He had lost a score of men, but he had captured the only navigable ship at his enemy's disposal. Several of the pirate crew were already at work striking the fetters from the slaves' ankles. They shouted for joy as they found long-lost friends among them. Others herded the captive Turanians into custody below.

While a prize crew continued the labor of freeing the vessel, the pirate ship cast off. Her decks were jammed, for her own crew was augmented by scores of freed and hastily-armed galley-slaves. She headed straight for bigger prize.

In a tavern in Onagrul, a secret stronghold of the Vilayet pirates, loud voices called for more wine. The cool clear liquid poured into old Artos' cup as the ears of the throng itched for more of his tales. The grizzled shipmaster washed down the draught in thirsty gulps. Satisfied, he wiped his lips upon the back of his hand and took in the crowd of listeners with a glance.

"Aye, lads, you should have been there! Great and glorious was the fighting as we took the first one. Then we swept down upon Yezdigerd's *Scimitar*. We must have seemed like very devils out of Hell, but they were ready. They severed the lines of our grapnels with swords and axes, until our archers blasted them back from the rail and we warped in to their side by mighty efforts. We laid her board and board, and every man among us was fired with killing-lust.

"Conan was the first aboard her. The Turanians closed in about him in a circle of swords, but he slashed at them so savagely that they gave way. Then we all came in a rush. The Turanians were all well-trained and hardened fighters, Yezdigerd's household troops, fighting under the eye of their king. For a moment the outcome was precarious, in spite of the ferocity of Conan, who smashed Turanian mail and arms like rotten wood. They stood in perfect unity, and our attacks recoiled from their massed ranks like bloody waves.

"Then came a cry of triumph, for some of us had jumped down among the galley-slaves, slain the overseers, and struck the chains from the rowers' ankles. The slaves surged up on the deck like a horde of lost souls. They snatched whatever weapons they could find from the corpses. Heedless of their own lines, they drove into the Turanians, shouldering us aside.

"The glittering ranks wavered. Conan yelled a weird battle-cry and flung himself

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into the press. We followed, determined to win or die.

"Conan was terrible as a tiger. He plunged in where the fighting was the thickest, and always his advent spelled doom for the Hyrkanians. With all his savage passion, he moved towards the poop where Yezdigerd himself stood bellowing orders, surrounded by his picked men.

"Conan smote their ranks like a charging elephant. Then a cry of rage came from Yezdigerd, and the king himself rushed to meet him. Savage curses streamed from his lips as they engaged.

"'I recognized your hand in this, Cimmerian cur!' he screamed. 'By Erlik, now you shall reap your deserts! Die, barbarian dog!'

"He aimed a terrific stroke at Conan's head. No ordinary man could have avoided or stopped that swift and powerful blow, but Conan parried it in a flashing movement too quick for the eye to follow.

"'Die yourself, jackal of Turan!' he thundered. For an instant they struck and parried like lightening, while the rest of us stopped fighting to watch. Then a mighty blow shattered Yezidgerd's shield and made him drop his shield-arm. In one lightening sweep, Conan smote the bearded head from the king's giant body.

"After that, the Turanians surrendered meekly enough. We did not get many prisoners, for the swords had taken too heavy a toll. A bare half of our original two hundred were left standing, but we had captured or slain five hundred of the Hyrkanian dogs."

He gulped down more wine and held out his cup for a refill. During the pause, a hearer asked: "What about the Turanian yedka? What became of her?"

Artus' brows clouded and he gave a visible shudder. "That was the strangest event of that memorable day. We were binding up wounds and herding prisoners when the sun seemed to cloud over and a chill of doom fell upon us. The water swirled blackly about our ships. Wind moaned in the rigging like the lament of a lost soul, though we were under the lee of a cliff.

"Someone cried and pointed up. In the sky appeared a black dot, growing swiftly larger. At first it looked like a bird or bat. Then it grew to a fantastic, horrible shape, manlike but winged. With a rush of vast leathery wings it swooped to the poop deck, uttering a shrill cry that smote our hearts like death.

"At that cry, the woman of Maypur stepped from the poop cabin, which none of us had yet entered. In the wink of an eye, the monster snatched her up and bore her off, flapping heavily over the

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oily waters of the channel. In a few seconds both were out of sight, and the sun shone once again.

"We stared at one another, white-faced. Had the fiend stayed, I am sure we should have all leaped into the sea to escape it, though it was gone so quickly that we had no time for panic. Even Conan looked shaken and pale.

"'I have seen that thing before,' he muttered, but he would not explain. Some of us surmised that the devil had come to drag Thanara off to the hell of Erlik's worshipers. But others, who had been standing close to her when the creature swooped upon us, said that she showed no fear of it, but rather eagerness, as if she had summoned it herself.

"At last Conan shook himself like one coming out of a daze and bellowed orders to strip the slain of valuables and pitch the corpses over the side, even the body of the king. All he would say of the abduction of Thanara was:

"'Let the damned hussy escape with her bogey-man. I do not war upon women, though I would have striped her hide for her treachery.'

"And that was the end of the matter. We burned the grounded galley and sailed the other one hither."

"And where is Conan?" cried another listener. "Why is he not here to tell us tales of his adventures himself? Will he return as our leader to sweep the Turanians from the sea?'

"Alas, no! The Cimmerian ordered the ships to make straight for the eastern shore. He said he was on a vital mission. One of the slaves we freed was a Khitan. Conan remained with him for hours, squatting in conversation. They talked of far lands beyond the Himelias. If Khitai be his goal, he must seek some really fabulous treasure."

"Why took he not a score of sea-rovers with him?"

"That is another mystery. He swore he had taken an oath to journey alone, and that his goal would be unattainable otherwise.

"We landed him on the eastern shore, and the farewell between him and Rolf the Northerner was short and manly. The crew in their sorrow began chanting a sea-dirge, until he lifted his mighty voice to curse us to silence. We watched him disappear behind a sand-dune on his way to unknown perils.

"Rolf is our captain now, and an abler one is not to be found barring Conan. For Conan will always remain the greatest captain of them all, even when Vilayet Sea has become a desert waste and the stars have fallen from the heavens. I drink his health. May his quest be successful!"

The toast was drunk in a silence oddly out of place in a pirates' tavern.

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the helpful robots

by ROBERT J. SHEA

They had come to pass judgement on him. He had violated their law — wilfully, ignorantly, and very deliberately.

"OUR people will be arriving to visit us today," the robot said.

"Shut up!" snapped Rod Rankin. He jumped, wiry and quick, out of the chair on his verandah and stared at a cloud of dust in the distance.

"Our people—" the ten-foot, cylinder-bodied robot grated, when Rod Rankin interrupted him.

"I don't care about your fool people," said Rankin. He squinted at the cloud of dust getting bigger and closer beyond the wall of *kesh* trees that surrounded the rolling acres of his plantation. "That damned new neighbor of mine is coming over here again."

He gestured widely, taking in the dozens of robots with their shiny, cylindrical bodies and pipestem arms and legs laboring in his fields. "Get all your people together and go hide in the wood, fast."

"It is not right," said the robot. "We were made to serve all."

"Well there are only a hundred of you, and I'm not sharing you with anybody," said Rankin.

"It is not right," the robot repeated.

Robert J. Shea, of Rutgers University, makes an interesting contribution to robotics with this story of Rankin, who prided himself on knowing how to handle robots, but did not realize that the robots of the Clearchan Confederacy were subject to a higher law than implicit obedience to man.

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"Don't talk to me about what's right," said Rankin. "You're built to follow orders, nothing else. I know a thing or two about how you robots work. You've got one law, to follow orders, and until that neighbor of mine sees you to give you orders, you work for me. Now get into those woods and hide till he goes away."

"We will go to greet those who visit us today," said the Robot.

"Alright, alright, scram," said Rankin.

The robots in the fields and the one whom Rankin had been talking to formed a column and marched off into the trackless forests behind his plantation.

A battered old ground-car drove up a few minutes later. A tall, broad-shouldered man with a deep tan got out and walked up the path to Rankin's verandah.

"Hi, Barrows," said Rankin.

"Hello," said Barrows. "See your crop's coming along pretty well. Can't figure how you do it. You've got acres and acres to tend, far's I can see, and I'm having a hell of a time with one little piece of ground. I swear you must know something about this planet that I don't know."

"Just scientific farming," said Rankin carelessly. "Look, you come over here for something, or just to gab? I got a lot of work to do."

Barrows looked weary and worried. "Them brown beetles is at my crop again," he said. "Thought you might know some way of getting rid of them."

"Sure," said Rankin. "Pick them off, one by one. That's how I get rid of them."

"Why, man," said Barrows, "you can't walk all over these miles and miles of farm and pick off every one of them beetles. You must know another way."

Rankin drew himself up and stared at Barrows. "I'm telling you all I feel like telling you. You going to stand here and jaw all day? Seems to me like you got work to do."

"Rankin," said Barrows, "I know you were a crook back in the Terran Empire, and that you came out beyond the border to escape the law. Seems to me, though, that even a crook, any man, would be willing to help his only neighbor out on a lone planet like this. You might need help yourself, sometime."

"You keep your thoughts about my past to yourself," said Rankin. "Remember, I keep a gun. And you've got a wife and a whole bunch of kids on that farm of yours. Be smart and let me alone."

"I'm going," said Barrows. He walked off the verandah and turned and spat carefully into the dusty path. He climbed into his ground car and drove off.

Rankin, angry, watched him go. Then he heard a humming noise from another direction.

He turned. A huge, white

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globe was descending across the sky. A space ship, thought Rankin, startled.

Police? This planet was outside the jurisdiction of the Terran Empire. When he'd cracked that safe and made off with a hundred thousand credits, he'd headed here, because the planet was part of something called the Clearchan Confederacy. No extradition treaties or anything. Perfectly safe, if the planet was safe.

And the planet was more than safe. There had been a hundred robots waiting when he landed. Where they came from he didn't know, but Rankin prided himself on knowing how to handle robots. He'd appropriated their services and started his farm. At the rate he was going, he'd be a plantation owner before long.

That must be where the ship was from. The robot said they'd expected visitors. Must be the Clearchan Confederacy visiting this robot outpost. Was that good or bad?

From everything he'd read, and from what the robots had told him, they were probably more robots. That was good, because he knew how to handle robots.

The white globe disappeared into the jungle of *kesh* trees. Rankin waited.

A half hour later the column of his robot laborers marched out of the forest. There were three more robots, painted grey, at the head. The new ones from the ship, thought Rankin. Well, he'd better establish who was boss right from the start.

"Stop right there!" he shouted.

The shiny robot laborers halted. But the three grey ones came on.

"Stop!" shouted Rankin.

They didn't stop, and by the time they reached the verandah, he cursed himself for having failed to get his gun.

Two of the huge grey robots laid gentle hands on his arms. Gentle hands, but hands of superstrong metal.

The third said, "We have come to pass judgement on you. You have violated our law."

"What do you mean?" said Rankin. "The only law robots have is to obey orders."

"It is true that the robots of your Terran Empire and these simple workers here must obey orders. But they are subject to a higher law, and you have forced them to break it. That is your crime."

"What crime?" said Rankin.

"We of the Clearchan Confederacy are a race of robots. Our makers implanted one law in us, and then passed on. We have carried our law to all the planets we have colonized. In obeying your orders, these workers were simply following that one law. You must be taken to our capital, and there be imprisoned and treated for your crime."

"What law? What crime?"

"Our law," said the giant robot, "is, *Help thy neighbor.*"

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i like martian music

by CHARLES E. FRITCH

Longtree played. His features relaxed into a gentle smile of happiness and his body turned a bright red orange.

LONGTREE sat before his hole in the ground and gazed thoughtfully among the sandy red hills that surrounded him. His skin at that moment was a medium yellow, a shade between pride and happiness at having his brief symphony almost completed, with just a faint tinge of red to denote that uncertain, cautious approach to the last note which had eluded him thus far.

He sat there unmoving for a while, and then he picked up his blowstring and fitted the mouthpiece between his thin lips. He blew into it softly and at the same time gently strummed the three strings stretching the length of the instrument. The note was a firm clear one which would have made any other musician proud.

But Longtree frowned, and at the disappointment his body flushed a dark green and began taking on a purple cast of anger. Hastily, he put down the blowstring and tried to think of something else. Slowly his normal color returned.

Across the nearest hill

There have been a number of interesting theories advanced about life on Mars, but few have equalled Charles Fritch's intriguing picture of the world of Longtree and Channeljumper in its infinite variations, tonal and thematic. The Mars of these two is an old culture, old and finite.

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came his friend Channeljumper, striding on the long thin ungainly legs that had given him his name. His skin radiated a blissful orange.

"Longtree!" Channeljumper exclaimed enthusiastically, collapsing on the ground nearby and folding his legs around him. "How's the symphony coming?"

"Not so good," Longtree admitted sadly, and his skin turned green at the memory. "If I don't get that last note, I may be this color the rest of my life."

"Why don't you play what you've written so far. It's not very long, and it might cheer you up a bit."

You're a good friend, Channeljumper, Longtree thought, and when Redsand and I are married after the Music Festival we'll have you over to our hole for dinner. As he thought this, he felt his body take on an orange cast, and he felt better.

"I can't seem to get that last note," he said, picking up the blowstring again and putting it into position. "The final note must be conclusive, something complete in itself and yet be able to sum up the entire meaning of the symphony preceding it."

Channeljumper hummed sympathetically. "That's a big job for one note. It might be a sound no one has ever heard before."

Longtree shrugged. "It may even sound *alien*," he admitted, "but it's got to be the right note."

"Play, and we'll see," Channeljumper urged.

Longtree played. And as he played, his features relaxed into a gentle smile of happiness and his body turned orange. Delicately, he strummed the three strings of the blowstring with his long-nailed fingers, softly he pursed his frail lips and blew expertly into the mouthpiece.

From the instrument came sounds the like of which Channeljumper had never before heard. The Martian sat and listened in evident rapture, his body radiating a golden glow of ecstacy. He sat and dreamed, and as the music played, his spine tingled with growing excitement. The music swelled, surrounding him, permeating him, picking him up in a great hand and sweeping him into new and strange and beautiful worlds—worlds of tall metal structures, of vast stretches of greenness and of water and of trees and of small pale creatures that flew giant metal insects. He dreamed of these things which his planet Mars had not known for millions of years.

After awhile, the music stopped, but for a moment neither of them said anything.

At last Channeljumper

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sighed. "It's beautiful," he said.

"Yes," Longtree admitted.

"But—" Channeljumper seemed puzzled—"but somehow it doesn't seem complete. Almost, but not quite. As though—as though—"

Longtree sighed. "One more note would do it. One more note—no more, no less—at the end of the crescendo could tie the symphony together and end it. But which one? I've tried them all, and none of them fit!"

His voice had risen higher in his excitement, and Channeljumper warned, "Careful, you're beginning to turn purple."

"I know," Longtree said mournfully, and the purple tint changed to a more acceptable green. "But I've got to win first prize at the festival tomorrow; Redsand promised to marry me if I did."

"You can't lose," Channeljumper told him, and then remembered, "if you can get that last note."

"If," Longtree echoed despairingly, as though his friend had asked the impossible. "I wish I had your confidence, Chan; you're orange most of the time, while I'm a spectrum."

"I haven't your artistic temperament," Channeljumper told him. "Besides, orange is such a homely color I feel ashamed to have it all the time."

As he said this, he turned green with shame, and Longtree laughed at the paradox.

Channeljumper laughed too, glad that he had diverted his friends attention from the elusive and perhaps non-existent note. "Did you know the space rocket is due pretty soon," he said, "perhaps even in time for the Music Festival."

"Space rocket?"

"Oh, I forgot you were busy composing and didn't get to hear about it," Channeljumper said. "Well, Bigwind who has a telescope in his hole told me a rocket is coming through space toward us, possibly from the third planet."

"Oh?" Longtree said, not particularly interested.

"I wonder if they'll look like us?" Channeljumper wondered.

"If they're intelligent, of course they will," Longtree said certainly, not caring. "Their culture will probably be alien, though, and their music—" He paused and turned a very deep yellow. "Of course! They might even be able to furnish the note I need to complete my symphony!"

Channeljumper shook his head. "You've got to compose it all yourself," he reminded, "or you don't qualify. And if you don't qualify, you can't win, and if you don't win, you can't marry Redsand."

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"But just one little note—" Longtree said.

Channeljumper shrugged helplessly and turned sympathetically green. "I don't make the rules," he said.

"No. Well," Longtree went on in sudden determination, "I'll find that last note if I have to stay permanently purple."

Channeljumper shuddered jestingly at this but remained pleasantly orange. "And I'll leave you alone so you can get to work," he said, unfolding himself.

"Goodbye," Longtree said, but Channeljumper's long legs had already taken him over to the nearest sand dune and out of sight.

Alone, Longtree picked up the blowstring once more, placed it against his stomach, and gave out with a clear, beautiful, experimental note which was again not the one he desired.

He still had not found it an hour later, when the Sound came. The Sound was a low unpleasant rumble, a sound lower than any Longtree had ever heard, and he wondered what it was. Thinking of it, he remembered he had seen a large flash of fire in the sky a moment before the roar came. But since this last was clearly not likely at all, he dismissed the whole thing as imagination and tried again to coax some new note from the blowstring.

A half hour later, Channeljumper came bounding excitedly over a sand dune. "They're here," he cried, screeching to a halt and emitting yellow flashes of color.

"Who's here?" Longtree demanded, turning violet in annoyance at the interruption.

"The visitors from space," Channeljumper explained. "They landed near my hole. They're little creatures, only half as big as we are, but thicker and grey colored."

"Gray colored?" Longtree repeated incredulously, trying to picture the improbability.

"But only on the outside," Channeljumper went on. "They have an outside shell that comes off, and inside they're sort of pink-orange."

"Ah-ha," Longtree said, as though he'd suspected it all the time. "Evidently they wear grey suits of some kind, probably for protection."

"They took them off anyway," Channeljumper said, eager to impart his knowledge, "and they were sort of pink-orange underneath. There are only two of them, and one has long hair."

"Strange," Longtree mused, thinking of their own hairless bodies. "Wonder what they want."

Channeljumper shrugged to indicate he didn't know. "The short-haired one followed me," he said.

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Longtree felt the chill blue of fear creep along his spine, but immediate anger at himself changed it conveniently to purple, and he was certain Channeljumper hadn't noticed. When he had controlled himself, he said, "Well, it doesn't matter I've got to get on with my symphony. That last note—"

"He's here," Channeljumper announced.

"What?"

Channeljumper pointed eagerly, and Longtree's eyes followed the direction to where the alien stood at the top of a nearby dune staring at them. Longtree could feel his skin automatically turning red with caution, blending with the sand while the ever-trusting Channeljumper remained bright orange.

"Good gosh," the alien exclaimed. "Not only do they look like modified grasshoppers, they change color too!"

"What'd he say?" Longtree demanded.

"How should I know?" Channeljumper said. "It's in another language."

"And its voice," Longtree exclaimed, almost disbelieving it, "Low. Lower than even our drums' rumble."

"And they talk in squeaks yet!" the alien told himself aloud.

Longtree regarded the alien carefully. As Channeljumper had said, the creature was short and had close-cropped hair on its head. The legs were brief and pudgy, and Longtree felt a shade of pity for the creature who could obviously not get around as well as they. It was undoubtedly intelligent—the space rocket testified to that—and the fact that the creature's skin color stayed a peaceful pink-orange helped assure Longtree the alien's mission was friendly.

The alien raised a short arm and stepped slowly forward. "I come in peace," he said in the language they could not understand. "My wife and I are probably the only humans left alive. When we left Earth, most of the population had been wiped out by atomics. I think we were the only ones to get away."

Longtree felt his redness subside to orange, as he wondered idly what the alien had said. Except for a natural curiousity, he didn't really care, for he remembered suddenly the symphony he had to finish by tomorrow if he were to marry Redsand. But there was the element of politeness to consider, so he nudged Channeljumper.

"Don't just stand there, say something!"

Channeljumper flustered and turned several colors in rapid succession. He stammered, "Er—ah—welcome to our planet, o visitor from space," and motioned the alien to sit down.

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"That's not very creative," Longtree accused.

"What's the difference," Channeljumper pointed out, "when he doesn't understand us anyway."

"You guys don't really look like grasshoppers," the man from Earth apologized, coming forward; "it's just the long legs that fooled me from up there. Boy, am I glad to find somebody intelligent on Mars; from the air we couldn't see any cities or anything, and we were afraid the planet didn't have any life. I wish we could understand each other, though."

Longtree smiled pleasantly and wished the creature would go away so he could search for the last note to his symphony. He picked up his blowstring so the alien wouldn't sit on it.

"Play for him," Channeljumper suggested, seating himself by segments. "Just the last part to see how he reacts. Music is universal, you know."

Longtree was going to do just that thing, for despite Channeljumper's warning that he must compose every single note by himself, he felt an alien viewpoint might be helpful.

He started playing. Channeljumper sat dreaming, glowing radiantly, but the alien seemed somewhat perturbed by the music and fidgeted nervously. Could it be, Longtree wondered, that the incredible beauty of his composition might not translate acceptably to alien ears? He dismissed the thought as unlikely.

"Er—that's a bit high, isn't it?" the creature said, shaking his head.

Lost in the sweeping melodies, neither Longtree nor Channeljumper paid any attention to the meaningless syllables. Longtree played on, oblivious to all else, soaring toward the great screaming crescendo that would culminate with the missing note.

Vaguely, he became aware that the creature had gotten up, and he turned a small part of his attention to the action. Longtree smiled inwardly, pleased, and turned yellow with pride to think even a man from another planet should so appreciate his symphony that he got up and danced a strange dance and even sang to the music.

The alien held onto his ears and leaped erratically, singing, "No, no, stop it. It's too high. My head's bursting!"

Channeljumper too seemed pleased by this show of appreciation, though neither of them understood the words, and Longtree swept into the final notes of the rising crescendo with a gusto he had not previously displayed. He stopped where he had always stopped—and the final note came!

It startled the Martians.

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Then the realization swept over them in glad tides of color. The symphony was complete now, with that final alien sound. Longtree could win both the festival prize and Redsand with it. The last note was a soft popping sound that had come from the creature from another planet. They looked to see him sagging to the ground, his head soft and pulpy.

"My symphony's complete," Longtree exclaimed jubilantly, a brilliant yellow now.

But Channeljumper's yellow happiness was tinged with green. "A pity," he said, "the creature had to give its life in exchange for the note."

"I believe it really wanted to," Longtree said, turning solemn. "Did you see how it danced to the music, as though in the throes of ecstacy, and it didn't change color once! It must have died happy to know it gave itself to a good cause."

"You could probably get by with claiming to use the creature as an auxiliary instrument," mused Channeljumper, practical once more, "and eliminate any claim that he might have assisted you. But what about the Festival? This one looks as though he doesn't have another note in him."

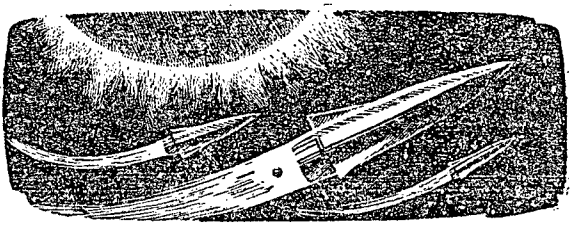
"There's the other one," Longtree reminded, "the one with long hair. We can save that one until tomorrow."

"Of course," Channeljumper agreed, standing up. "I'll go get it, and you can keep it safe here in your hole until tomorrow night."

"You're a good friend, Channeljumper," Longtree began, but the other was already bounding out of sight over a sand dune.

Blissfully he raised the blowstring into position and played the opening notes to his symphony. The alien lay unmoving with its head in a sticky puddle, but Longtree took no notice. He didn't even consider that after the Festival he would never be able to play his symphony again in all its glorious completeness. His spinal column tingled pleasantly, and his skin turned the golden yellow of unbearable happiness.

The music was beautiful.



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shapes in the sky

by CIVILIAN SAUCER INTELLIGENCE

Angel Hair, Gossamer Showers and Flying Jellyfish —and what these have to do with UFO sightings today.

ONE WEEKEND early this spring we were over in western New Jersey nosing out an unusual UFO observation. Ivan Sanderson had heard from Chester Ehrie, of Belvidere, of an incident of a few years back that was said to involve that rare and mysterious stuff we call "angel hair." With the helpful assistance of Mr. Ehrie, we ended up in a hilltop home outside Easton, Pennsylvania, listening to pretty Mrs. Anna Eliason describe what she had seen on the morning of November 10, 1949. (This date gives the case the distinction—until someone comes up with an earlier one—of being the first typical "angel hair" report on record.)

The Eliasons were living then in a little house in Depue's Ferry, Pennsylvania, overlooking the Delaware River and directly opposite Foul Rift, New Jersey. It was a brilliant autumn day, with a cloudless blue sky, and not a breath of wind. One of two electricians' men installing the antenna for the Eliasons' new TV set came

The Research Section of Civilian Saucer Intelligence continues to discuss angel hair and related phenomena in their fourth bi-monthly column on UFO sightings and reports, written specially for this magazine. CSI publishes a newsletter, has an extensive file of material on the subject.

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into the kitchen to tell Mrs. Eliason that there were some things in the sky that "must be what they call flying saucers." She went out and saw them too. High up in the southwestern sky, over the ridge that runs along the river, an indefinite number of bright, round objects were passing. "I could only compare them to electric light bulbs," she told us. They appeared to be not much smaller than the full moon in angular measurement. She could not be certain whether their brightness was due to luminosity, or was merely the reflection of the sun, which dazzled the eye and interfered somewhat with observation.

Apparently they were not disc-shaped, but spherical, as they did not flutter, and presented the same circular shape at all times. They were visible only briefly as they moved rapidly and horizontally along; whether all were moving in the same direction, or there was a coming or going, the witness cannot now recall, but at any rate she did not observe the acrobatic behavior noted on such occasions. The display was gradually receding from her toward the southwest, and had evidently passed overhead a few minutes earlier. While they watched, something like cobwebs began to fall from the sky. Descending vertically in long strands and skeins, it festooned bushes and leafless trees with gleaming sheets of gossamer. In a surprisingly short time, according to Mrs. Eliason, "very heavy drapes of cobwebs" were spread over everything in sight. A dead tree near the house was "just covered with it." Though somewhat astonished by all this, Mrs. Eliason returned to the house to look after her children and prepare lunch. The "angel hair" was still falling when she went in, and she never did learn how long the shower lasted.

Unlike real spiderweb, these silky fibres melted away like snow in sunshine. About 1 p.m., Mrs. Eliason's sister Helen drove up to visit her; enough was still in evidence at that time to cause her to remark on "those cobwebs all over the place." But by 5:30, when William Eliason (a plumbing contractor and former Air Force captain) returned home, there was no trace of them left. He was struck by his wife's story, and thought she might at least have touched some of the strange stuff. However, she had not done so, and whether it would have become gelatinous and evaporated when handled, or (as at Marysville, Ohio five years later) imparted a temporary green stain to the fingers, must remain unknown.

It is apparent that a very considerable amount of this

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unknown substance must have fallen from the spherical objects as they passed slowly from Warren County, New Jersey west-southwestward toward Nazareth, Pennsylvania. Nevertheless, the only other observations we have heard of are by Mr. Eliason's father in Bridgeville, N.J. (six miles northeast of Depue's Ferry), who noticed the sky objects but not the "angel hair", and by Mrs. Eliason's cousin Irene Thomas, in Hazen (four miles east-northeast of Depue's Ferry), whose "cleaning lady" remarked to her daughter, "Janet, I really ought to get up and clean off your television antenna—it's just covered with cobwebs!" And this is the sum total of our information on what took place in sight of many thousands of people, just sixty miles west of New York City, less than eight years ago.

For the sake of comparison, here are two briefly-reported incidents that occurred five and seven years later:

Late afternoon of October 28, 1954: Three objects like "luminous silver coins" passed rapidly and silently over Rome in V formation; apparent size comparable to the moon; seen by U.S. Ambassador to Italy Clare Booth Luce, who said: "I saw something, but I don't know what it was." A few minutes after their passage, "cab drivers declared they saw fine cotton or wool particles falling from the sky and hanging on telephone wires." (AP in N.Y. *Journal-American*, Oct. 29, 1954.)

Sept. 30, 1956, Cherry Valley, Illinois: Mr. and Mrs. L. L. Leonard noticed numerous round, white objects nearly overhead and travelling very fast; through 7X binoculars, they appeared half the size of a pea at arm's length. "The objects suddenly ejected long white streamers, which floated in the air, hanging absolutely perpendicular. These silver streamers must have been of an enormous length. In one part of the southwestern sky there was a concentration of them which looked like stationary silver rain, a most eerie sight. While we were watching these round white things explode, one of them came just below our tree tops, but I couldn't see where it landed. On one of our evergreens there was something that looked like spider webs, but had the consistency of spun glass; and next morning a long piece of "something" was plastered on the fender of my car." (CRIFO *Orbit*, III-9, Dec. 1956.)

It seems incredible that a phenomenon of such well-marked character, reported nearly a score of times since 1949, should never have been observed prior to that time. But everyone who has looked into the data on unidentified flying objects knows how

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difficult it is to find unambiguous examples of the typical silvery-disk "flying saucer" earlier than the outbreak of June, 1947. The same is true of "angel hair." It may be that the phenomenon has really come into existence only within the last eight or ten years.

However, we *do* find on record numerous examples of falls of cobwebby substance from the sky which in some ways so strikingly resemble present-day "angel-hair" falls that it seems not unreasonable to hazard the identification—even though sky objects are unmentioned. Here are several instances—mostly taken from Fort, but we quote in all cases from the original reference:

September 21,1741, Selborne, England: Gilbert White, a renowned amateur naturalist, arose to find the countryside "matted all over with a thick coat of cobweb." About 9 a.m., "a second shower of cobwebs began to fall, and continued until the close of day." The material fell in "flakes or rags", "descending into sight on every side in a constant succession, and twinkling in the sun." It hung on trees and hedges "so thick, that a diligent person might have gathered baskets full." Though White was satisfied that it must have been "the production of small spiders" (significantly enough, he makes no mention of having *observed* any such spiders), he remarks that "why their webs should all at once become so gross and material as to be consideruly more weighty than air, and to descend with precipitation, is past my skill." (*Natural History of Selborne,* 1789.)

September 16, 1823, Bewdley, England: Great quantities of webby substance, some in "branched filaments" up to 50 feet in length, some in "woolly films, or flocculi", fell from 11 a.m. to 2 p.m. "The whole atmosphere seemed to be a tissue of cobwebs." Some of the material fell slowly, some more rapidly. (John Murray in *Mem. Wernerian Nat. Hist. Soc., 5,* 388.) Although Murray's article is specifically concerned with gossamer spiders, he says nothing of having found any spiders in association with this "gossamer", whose fall he himself observed.

October 1, 1826, vicinity of Liverpool, England: Fields covered for many miles with light, filmy substance, "mistaken by many persons for cotton", which fell thickly from the sky. Trees and lamp-posts festooned with the filaments, some many yards long. The "gossamer" was found to contain tiny flies, but no spiders. (London *Times,* Oct. 9, 1826.)

Late October, 1881, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and places as much as 100 miles distant: A widespread fall of

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"spiderwebs" in strands from two to sixty feet long, strong in texture and very white. "Curiously, there is no mention, in any of the reports that we have seen, of the presence of spiders." (*Scientific American, 45* (1881), 337.)

November 21, 1893, Montgomery, Alabama: Web-like substance in flakes and films up to 20 feet long "falling from trees and leaves to the ground." It was stated that the substance was not spiderweb, but resembed fine asbestos fibres; also that it "showed a phosphorescent effect." (*Monthly Weather Review*, 26 (1893), 566.)

On the night of February 20-21, 1955, a large quantity of "ragged sheets" and skeins of cobwebby grey fibres, some many feet in length, fell on an area half a mile square in Horseheads (near Elmira), New York. By the 22nd, it was "disintegrating and disappearing." Because of the season (snow lay on the ground), it was not possible here to speak of "spider gossamer", and some fantastic explanations were put forward, accompanied by incredibly contradictory "analyses." Prof. Charles B. Rutenber of Elmira College's chemistry department, supported by Professor-Emeritus Francis Richmond, said his tests proved the material consisted of "extremely short-fibered cotton, heavily damaged in an explosion." He suggested that the stuff (which, contrary to newspaper headlines, was not radioactive) might have been carried in an atomic bomb-debris cloud from Nevada, finally "knitting itself together" and falling out over this single quarter square mile in southern Horseheads! But the next day, John Diffenderfer, in charge of chemists at the nearby Westinghouse electronic-tube factory, said *their* analyses showed that the substance must have formed from powdered milk, presumably blown into the air from a flue at a nearby milk-processing plant. Now, there is absolutely no chemical similarity between cotton (cellulose) and milk (a protein, like wool and spiderweb).

The Atomic Energy Commission endorsed the milk theory, and conjured up an "explosion and fire in a local dairy" to account for it. To complete the comedy, two chemical technicians at the Dairylea milk plant flatly contradicted Diffenderfer and the AEC, asserting that the web consisted of a mixture of cotton and wool fibres—together with a few fragments of fine copper wire! Under the circumstances, it seems permissible to suppose that this web, as in some other instances, was partially or wholly of protein nature, and was called "milk" (or "wool") rather than "gossamer" sim-

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ply because gossamer spiders are not a thinkable explanation in February. (Elmira *Star-Gazette*, 2/22/55; N.Y. *Journal-American*, 2/22; N.Y. *World-Telegram;* 2/23, 3/8; FATE, Aug. 1955.)

What regularities can we notice in these cases? Only two can be called invariable: the falling of the substance in rags, flakes, and skeins, rather than as isolated gossamer threads; and the complete absence of the multitude of spiders required to produce such a prodigious quantity of web. There is also an obvious concentration about the month of October, a circumstance which would harmonize with the spider theory if it were confined to the Northern Hemisphere; but it seems to be true also of the Southern Hemisphere, where October is a spring month. However, the Puente and Horseheads cases show that falls may also occur in midwinter.

The volatility of "angel hair", especially when touched by human hands, is one of its most astonishing features, but it seems to be variable. Even in unquestionably "UFOgenic" cases, like that of Whitsett, N.C., it can go unremarked, and the fibres can be stable enough to handle and analyze; in others, as at Oloron, the material is very fugitive. No odorless, volatile substance that could form silky filaments like this is known to chemistry; and one whose volatility is not always the same would be an even greater scientific anomaly. It is difficult to avoid lugging the spiritualists' "ectoplasm", and conjecturing that what happens may be not so much evaporation as "dematerialization"—whatever that may mean.

Now, it seems that *spherical objects* of a similar "ectoplasmic" substance sometimes occur in the sky. One instance is the Philadelphia "purple sphere" of 1950 (FU, May issue), whose flimsy consistency and rapid dissolution on being touched irresistibly suggest that it was composed of "angel hair". A second is the Swedish 1808 observation of "gelatinous hat crowns" (ibid), whose rapid "drying up" was noted by the witnesses. (When "angel hair" disappears, according to witnesses, it first becomes gelatinous. This is probably not attributable simply to moisture picked up from the air, because *touching* the material causes almost immediate gelatinization.) A third example occurred shortly before the writing of this article:

On March 20, 1957, in Charlotte, N.C., Mr. and Mrs. W. B. Brown were outdoors at 8:45 p.m. when five white objects "like bubbles—about the size of a basketball" came floating over the rooftops. They were nonluminous, and visible by re-

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flection of the street lights. Four "sailed off", but the fifth fell out of the group and dropped to the street. It sounded like a thin sheet of ice slapping against the ground", said Brown. Where the object had splattered on the asphalt, they found a five-yard area wet with a semi-liquid substance that "felt slippery to the touch, like an alkaline solution" and was "cooling or numbing" to the touch. "It smelled sort of like burnt matches." (Charlotte *Observer*, March 22.)

The similarity to the Swedish case is obvious, even to the "soapy" feeling.

It is tempting to put all these incidents together, into some such speculative picture as this:

In the earth's stratosphere, there live large flocks of spherical entities or creatures, about six feet in diameter when fully grown, and of a very light, gelatinous composition, with a brightly silvery-white surface or skin. What keeps them aloft—whether a hydrogen bladder, or an actual antigravitic faculty—isn't known. These aerial "jellybirds", in contrast to marine jellyfish, are capable of great speed—though how they manage this is completely unknown. Astronomers occasionally catch sight of their migratory "hosts" crossing the sun. (We have no space here to cite the numerous recorded descriptions of this phenomenon, which remind one of that given by the Swedish ground observers of 1808. One astronomer, Bonilla, has photographed one of the objects, showing filmy appendages.) Only rarely do they descend low enough to be seen from the ground. When (by mischance or illness) one falls to the ground and is killed, there is found a lump of soapy jelly, which soon disappears. Their migration and mating season, all over the world, is the months of September to November. At this period, they descend to lower altitudes (like marine fish returning to fresh water to spawn) and dance in groups, later in pairs; and they put forth webby tentacles like those photographed by Bonilla, which temporarily link their clusters together. These appendages are shed after mating, and descent to the ground as a fall of "angel hair." (It may be too that, as with many insects, the males die after mating.) Those that perish in mid-air, we may presume, usually burst open (cf. 1950 Paradise, California case) and lose their moisture, leaving a cobwebby "skeleton" of angel hair, which evaporates before it reaches the ground (unless the death occurred at low altitude). The Philadelphia sphere may be regarded as the desiccated corpse of such a creature, which for

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some reason had failed to burst, and had been "mummified" in its natural spherical form. Falls of angel hair outside of the autumn months are a sign of disasters among the denizens of the stratosphere.

Such an hypothesis may be as far from the truth as the perversity of human wit can make it; it is unquestionably in conflict with present scientific view of what is possible. But it would account for a great many observations in a persuasively "natural" way. The behaviour of many UFOs, including those that have emitted angel hair, compellingly suggests that of living beings, rather than piloted machines. Such qualified students of the problem as Ivan Sanderson (FU, Feb. 1957), Walter Karig (*American Weekly*, Nov. 22, 1953), and Kenneth Arnold himself, whose 1947 observation ushered in the "modern" UFO age, have all independently been struck by this, and have argued for a "space animal" theory.

Reader, if you are ever so fortunate as to encounter any "angel hair" or gelatinous matter fallen from the sky, consider the possibility that it may represent the mortal remains of a "flying saucer." And after considering this melancholy thought, try to get as much of it as possible into hermetically sealed containers. If you will send a sample to this magazine, though we can't guarantee any results, we can at any rate do no worse a job of analysis on it than the Horseheads chemists did.

NEXT MONTH—

THREE EXCITING NOVELETS—

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DEATH FOR A HUNTER by MICHAEL SHAARA

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stopover

by WILLIAM GERKEN

When he opened the door to the shed that day, and saw the axe suspended in mid-air, he understood what was wrong.

HE HAD been living with us for a week before I found out he was a Lifter. Even the discovery was an accident. I had started for the store, but then remembered a chore I wanted him to do. I heard the sounds of wood-chopping coming from the shed, so I went behind the house to the small wooden structure. I must have gasped or something, because he turned around to look at me, dropping the axe he had poised over a block of wood as he turned. Only he hadn't been holding the axe; it had been hanging in mid-air without support.

The first time I saw him was when he knocked on my door. I don't think I'll ever forget how he looked—tall and thin, old clothes and older shoes, an unruly mop of blond hair. It was only when I looked at his face that I realized that he was more than a mere boy of eighteen or nineteen. The tired lines around his mouth, the sad, mature look in his eyes, the stoop already evident in his young shoulders; he had been forced to mature too quickly, and seemed to have knowledge a

What will the world be like, the day after Tomorrow, for the lonely ones who will have talents that others will half fear, half envy? William Gerken describes this strange world in which young and old will have to find new values and pursue new dreams, as they search for the answer . . . .

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boy his age had no right to be burdened with.

"I—I was wondering if I might get a bite to eat, sir," he said.

I grinned. No matter how he looked, he was no different from anyone else his age where food was concerned. "Sure; come on in and rest a spell," I told him. Marty, can you fix a plate of something? We've got a guest." Marty—my wife—glanced through the kitchen doorway. After a cursory look at the boy, she smiled at him and went back to work.

"Sit down, son, you look pretty done-in. Come far today?"

He nodded. "Guess it shows, huh?" he said, brushing the road dust from his trousers.

"Uh-huh. Where you from? Not around here, I know."

"Far back as I can remember, Oregon has been home."

It wasn't hard to guess why he was almost a thousand miles from home. During the war, over ten million American families had been separated, their way of life destroyed by the hell of atomic bombings. Ever since its end, people had been seeking their loved ones; many, only to find them dead or dying. Sometimes the searches stretched across continents or oceans. In that respect the boy sitting opposite me was no different from hundreds of others I've seen in the past ten years. The only difference was in his face.

"Looking for your family," I said, making it a statement.

"Yessir." He smiled, as though the sentence had double meaning.

After he had eaten, he went down to the town store to look through its records. They all do. They turn the pages of the big stopover book, hoping a relative or friend had passed through the same town. Then they sign the book, put down the date and where they're headed, and set out once more. Almost all towns have stopover books nowadays, and a good thing, too. They helped me find Marty back in '63, when the truce was finally signed. In fact, I found her right here in this town. We got married, settled down, and haven't been more than a hundred miles away since then.

Martha called me into the kitchen almost as soon as he was gone. "He's a nice boy."

"That he is," I agreed. "You know, I've been thinking; we could use a young fella around here to help with the work."

"If he'll stay. There was something in his eyes; a sort of longing for someone very close to him. That kind usually takes off after a night's rest."

"I know. Guess I'll drop by the store; see if I can talk him into staying."

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By the time I reached the store, school was out, and a group of kids were gathered around him, listening to his description of the Rocky Mountains, which he had crossed during the summer. The kids weren't the only ones listening. Even the adults were standing around in the store, remembering the places they had once seen themselves, and getting such bits of news as he dropped about the other towns he had passed through. The Searchers are, next to the town radio stations, the only source of information we have now, so it's no wonder they're so warmly greeted wherever they stop.

Soon as he'd finished telling about the Rockies, I said we'd appreciate it if he would stay for supper. He said he would, and later, while he and Tommy, my eight-year-old son, and I were walking home, I asked him if he'd stay with us for awhile.

For a moment he looked wistful, as if wishing he could stay here, and forget whoever he was trying to find. Then he smiled and said, thanks, he would stay for a week or so.

He was real helpful, too, cutting stove and fireplace wood for the coming winter running errands, hunting for game animals, and teaching at the school. Almost all Searchers teach when they can be persuaded to stay in town for a spell. Since there are no more colleges to produce teachers, anyone who knows something useful takes a turn at teaching. 'Fore the war, I was a mathematics major in college, so twice a week I teach all kinds of math at school, from numbers through calculus. Mostly, Searchers teach about what the places they had passed through are like.

Then, when I opened the door to the shed that day, and saw the axe suspended in mid-air, I suddenly realized why he had that sad, tired look about him all the time.

He picked up the axe from where it had fallen, and stood it against the wall. Reaching for his jacket, he said, "I—I guess I'd better be moving along, Mr Tranton. I'm really sorry if I've caused you any trouble." He started past me for the door.

"Hold on, son." I grabbed his arm. "Why the rush?"

"I don't want to cause you any trouble. Now that you know what I am—" he grit the words out bitterly, "the word will get around. I wouldn't want the others in town to be angry with you because of me. You and Mrs. Tranton have been swell to me. Thanks for everything." He tried to pull his arm loose, but I held fast

"Let's go inside and have a cup of coffee," I suggested. "I don't know about the other towns you've been through,

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but here we don't hate a person because he might happen to have powers we don't."

"Yesterday I was down at the store, and I heard one of the men sounding off about us," he said. "He didn't sound like he cared much for us."

"Must have been John Atherson. He never could understand ESP, and he blames the war on it. We just let him talk; can't change a person like that." We went up the back steps and through the door into the kitchen. "Go on, show Marty," I said, taking off my jacket.

He looked at me to make sure I meant it. Then he raised the coffee pot from the stove, and watched it move across the room under its own power to the table where I was sitting. Leaving the pot in mid-air, he made the cupboard open, and still standing in the middle of the room, floated three cups and saucers to the table. Then he got the cream, sugar and three spoons, put them on the table, and poured the coffee. Marty watched the coffee pot move back to the stove, her mouth open in amazement, "I heard of it, but I don't think I'd have believed it if I hadn't seen it." I nodded, and she smiled at him. "Now that I know," she said, "I'm even gladder you chose to stay here for awhile."

He grinned. "Thanks." He sat down with us at the table, and stirred some sugar into his coffee.

"It must be hard on you," Marty said quietly, in a knowing way. "Are you really looking for your family, or for others with ESP?"

"My father was killed during the bombings. After that, Mom and I were alone. She only had a little talent; Dad and I were the ones who were really adept. Anyway, we stayed on the small farm we owned until last spring. Then mom married again, and I was free to leave. I think her new husband was sorry to see me go, because it meant a lot of manual work for him that I had been doing an easier way. I decided to see if I couldn't find any others like myself, so I left and started across the country."

"Do you have any other powers, or can you just control things?" Marty asked.

He grinned. "If you mean, am I an all-around superman, no. Dad wasn't either. I do have a scattering of other psi talents, though, but nothing as well-developed as my telekinesis. I'm still working on them."

Tommy came in from school just then. "Could you teach him how to use his mind that way, or do you have to be born with it?" I said.

He smiled again. "No, you don't have to be born with it. Everyone could do it if they started training themselves young enough to use their

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minds to the fullest extent. All through history certain people have had strange powers. The trouble was, they were thought to be freaks instead of the better developed humans they actually were. Even now, we're only on the threshhold of learning the full power of the mind." He turned to Tommy. "Would you like to learn how to do things, Tommy?"

"Sure. Like what?"

He glanced at Marty and me. "Like making the world a better place to live."

Two weeks later, at a meeting of the town council, I wasn't too worried about getting the proposal accepted. We might have some trouble with Atherson, but I figured between the two of us we could handle him. When the new business came up, I stood up and led Tommy to the front of the hall. There were a few whispers as we went, as children under fifteen aren't allowed in the hall during a council meeting.

"Tommy has something to say to you which, I think, will interest everyone here. Go on, son."

Seconds afterwards, we all heard a clear "Hello," but not with our ears; the word came from inside our heads.

Someone said: "The kid's a telepath," and the silence was broken.

Everybody was talking at the same time.

"I suppose you think it's an honor to have one of them damn things for your son," Atherson yelled. "I'm glad you're the one who got stuck, and not me."

"Tommy was not *born* a telepath, John," I told him. "He has been *deliberately trained* to make use of the latent power in his brain. And I don't think I'm 'stuck' either. We all know we've been slowly slipping into retrogression ever since '63. None of us like it, but there isn't anything we can do to halt it—yet. We don't want our children, or their children, to keep slipping backwards. If we don't stop it in our lifetime, we may not be able to stop it at all.

"As I see it, the best chance we have to at least achieve a status quo is to accept the aid those among us with psi talents are willing to give. After all, it's their world, too. With their help, we may be able to build a better civilization, one without the socio-political diseases that led to the war.

"The young man who has been staying at my house for the past three weeks taught Tommy to do what he just did. He says he thinks he can do it with any child under ten years old, and is even willing to try it with some teen-agers. Of course, Tommy's training has just begun. He will keep on learning for years.

"Here's my idea. If some of the children get a grounding

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in how to develop their dormant brain power, by the time they're twenty, they'll be able to mold a new society, one geared to the present culture instead of the past traditions. How about it?"

I waited. For a minute there was silence. Finally one of the older men stood up. "Is he sure he can do it?"

"All we know is it worked with Tommy," I replied.

"I don't like it; it's unnatural," Atherson said.

"No one asked you to like it," some one said.

Another called: "Do you think three world wars in fifty years *is* natural? Let's take a vote."

A vote was taken, and it was decided to add an extra class for those children whose parents wanted them to attend. After a month, the council would expect a report on what progress—or lack of it—had been made.

A few weeks later, when my math class was over, I hung around to watch the new class. It was divided into small groups, each training on a different psi talent. One group was lifting pencils and gently returning them to desks by telekinesis. Another was sitting quietly, once in a while breaking into shouts of laughter; probably telepathy. There were other groups, but I didn't know enough about the talents to identify their work.

During the time he was teaching, he met a girl. They spent quite a bit of time together, and she joined the special class. By the time the report to the council came due, it wasn't hard to tell they were in love.

Just about everyone in town turned out for that meeting. The boys and girls who were taking the class were seated at the front of the hall. The report was first on the agenda, so the kids could go home to bed.

"When we started," he said, "I asked those children who weren't interested, or who were—um—unsuited to the work, to leave. Then we ran through a general training exercise, and after a week, I split the class up into groups. Each group was to concentrate on one talent, but general sessions for the entire class give everyone practice in all talents. I think we've made fairly good progress. Some of the older teen-agers have shown an interest in the talents (he glanced at his girl), and although progress has not been as rapid as with the younger children, they are sufficiently developed to help instruct. Now your children are going to demonstrate what they have learned."

For the next half hour we watched Tommy and fourteen other boys and girls work. Tommy and the others who had concentrated on telepathy read silently to us from

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books and talked to each other, projecting their thoughts so we could also listen in. The telekinesis group all worked together to build a small table. All the necessary materials were stacked at the front of the room. The kids sat in a half circle, their brows furrowed in concentration as lumber, nails and hammers moved under the guidance of their minds. When they had finished, the table was complete, even to the sanding and a coat of varnish.

Finally, the only one with precognition—a girl about six years old, with long blonde hair—gave the weather forecast for the next two weeks. Copies of her prediction were passed out to us, so we could check her accuracy.

Once the kids were gone, he stood up again. "I hope you are all convinced as to what can be accomplished through the use of psi. The talents can and should be used for the betterment of society, not for carnival side shows. Of course, there are more than those just demonstrated. Unfortunately, I couldn't find them present in this group. I was hoping for either a healer or a sensitive, but no one had the necessary ability.

"If you want the class continued, the decision is yours. Thanks for having open minds, and for giving me a chance." He picked up his jacket and walked out.

Atherson didn't bother to come to the meeting, so the vote to continue the class was unanimous.

He stayed on, teaching part time, helping out with the work at my place, and seeing his girl. Then, one afternoon two weeks after the council meeting, she came to see me. "You've got to stop him, Mr. Tranton," she said. "He's going to leave. He told me he was going right after he finished the class today. He's probably down at the store right now, buying things to take with him. You've got to make him stay."

"Why?" I asked quietly, watching the tears well up in her eyes. She hadn't lost her composure yet, but she felt so strongly about him she was on the verge of breaking down.

"Because I love him and he loves me," she retorted. "That's why. Won't you talk to him? At least get him to take me with him. Please."

"You said you love him. Would you rather he stayed here, and was never fully happy, or left to continue searching, maybe to return someday, ready to settle down? If you really love him there's no question."

"Couldn't he take me with him?"

I shook my head. "I don't think you should even ask him to take you. You'd be a burden that would slow him down. He'd worry about you,

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have to get your food, find shelter for you. He might let you go with him, but don't ask him to. He's too young to be tied down. Now go on, and wish him good luck and kiss him goodbye. He's coming up the road now."

She glanced out the open window, jumped up, and ran out into the sunlight, to wait at the side of the road. I picked up the book I had been reading, but the window was too close to the road for me to concentrate on the pages. She didn't say anything until he was standing before her.

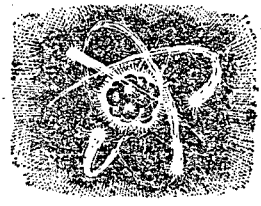
"I'll be waiting," she said. "Take care of yourself."

He nodded. "I have to go," he told her. "Partly because it was Dad's last wish, partly because I need others of my own kind. Alone, we can't help the world much; together, there's a good chance for results. I left a letter for the council saying you were going to take over the class, because you have the ability to carry on. Watch Cathy, and help her all you can. She's got it; her weather forecast proved that much. You've got to drum that into her; never let her forget it. Maybe I'll be back—I hope so. But first, I have to find others. I need them, and they might need me. We're still not completely self-sufficient.

"Give the kids my love, and keep them at it. Just don't forget they *are* kids. Give them a chance to grow up as normally as possible. That's a chance I didn't have."

He kissed her tenderly, then started off down the road. When he reached the crest of the hill, he turned and waved. Marty joined me at the doorway, and we waved too. Outlined against the bright blue afternoon sky, he stood immobile for a moment. To many, he would have been just a young man with a tired-out face; but to me, the symbol of a better life for Tommy and his children...a life unmarred by the threat of instant death as punishment for something he had little control over.

He's gone now, but the work will go on, and the Athersons of the world will come to realize he is giving us another chance, a chance we don't really deserve. Somehow he reminds me of another man. A man who said: "Suffer the little children to come unto me, and forbid them not; for of such is the kingdom of God."



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the unrare earths

by ISAAC ASIMOV

What are these rare earth metals and what part can they play in our lives today and in the years to come?

THE WORK that led to the atom bomb also helped liberate fourteen metals from useless slavery to an unjust name.

The early chemists, it seems, called certain non-metallic substances "earths." These "earths" showed little or no solubility in water and could be heated red-hot without melting or changing. The name was rather a good one, because the earth itself, or at least the outer crust of the earth, was made up mainly of five "earths". These were the oxides of silicon, aluminum, iron, calcium and magnesium. Singly and in combination, they make up 90 per cent of the earth's crust.

Of these "earths", magnesium oxide ("magnesia") and calcium oxide ("lime") do dissolve a bit in water and the solutions show definite alkaline properties. These were therefore called "the alkaline earths". In 1808, the alkaline earths were broken down and the metals, magnesium and calcium, separated in reasonably pure form. Naturally, they were called "the alkaline earth metals". When other

Dr. Isaac Asimov, prominent biochemist and science fiction writer, here discusses the group of fourteen metallic elements that, until recently, were grouped together as "the rare earth metals", and what happened to these neglected metals in these days of research on uranium fission.

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elements chemically similar to magnesium and calcium were discovered (including beryllium, strontium, barium, and radium) they, too, were lumped under that classification.

About 1800, certain minerals were discovered in Scandinavia which contained oxides that had the properties of "earths". These new "earths", however, were much less common than were magnesium oxide and calcium oxide and so they were called "the rare earths" by way of comparison. By 1907, a series of fourteen metallic elements had been isolated from the rare earths. They were called "the rare earth metals."

To begin with, how rare, really, are the rare earths? How just is this name? In Table I, I list the occurrence of each of the rare earth metals in the soil in parts per million (the number of pounds, that is, for every million pounds of the earth's crust). In Table II, I list for comparison the concentration of some other elements which may not be among the most common but are at least familiar and useful and used in fair quantities.

The total for all the rare earth metals comes to nearly 120 parts per million. This is over 50 per cent more than the amount of copper in the world. Cerium, the most common of the rare earth metals, is just about as common as tin. It is two and a half times as common as lead. Neodymium and lanthanum are each more common than lead. Even the rarest rare earth metal, thulium, is almost as common as iodine and two hundred times as common as gold.

Yet the rare earth metals, despite the fact that they are not so very rare after all, have been neglected by mankind. Their uses are very minor.

For instance, a mixture of the rare earth metals is called "misch metal" which is German for "mixed metal". It is half cerium and the rest is mostly lanthanum and neodymium. It is alloyed with iron to form cigarette-lighter flints, because the alloy gives off particularly hot sparks when struck.

Cerium oxide is added to glass to keep it colorless and to remove the green tinge that might result from the presence of iron. In powder form, it is used to polish glass. Neodymium oxide is added to glass to give a purple color which is useful in safety goggles, protecting against the glare of glowing metal or glass. Lanthanum oxide is used in arc lights and in the manufacture of special kinds of optical glass.

That's about all of any importance. A pretty poor score for fourteen metals.

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How much of this neglect is due to the unfortunate word "rare"? Certainly, the rare earth metals are neglected in chemistry classes and hardly ever mentioned or discussed (except for the interesting electron structure of their atoms, but that is another story.) Chemistry students never think of them except as "rare" elements with funny names, probably, and if they enter chemistry as a profession, they are not likely to think of working with the rare earth elements.

Sometimes, it is said that the rare earth elements are really rare, even if considerable quantities *are* present in the soil. They are spread thin, you see, so that pockets of profitable ore are not easily found. This used to be said about uranium ores, too. However, once we decided that uranium was important and *had* to be found, we found more pockets of ore than we expected, and we learned how to make even poor ores worth-while. (Uranium, by the way, is less common than half the rare earth elements. It is only one-tenth as common as cerium.)

A more serious objection is that once you get your hands on some of the rare earth elements, the trouble *really* starts. You see, all the rare earth elements are very similar chemically. As the earth's crust hardened, the various rare earth elements crystallized out in the same places and in the same ways. Rocks that contain compounds of any of the rare earth elements contain them all.

Well, how do we separate elements that nature could not. Before World War II, it was done by a process known as "fractional crystallization."

The mixture of rare earth metals in the form of a particular type of compound is dissolved in an appropriate liquid. This liquid is slowly boiled away and as this happens, the rare earth compounds begin to precipitate as crystals. The compounds of the various rare earth metals differ slightly from one another in solubility and the least soluble crystallize out first. The first batch of crystals is removed: another patch forms and is removed and so on.

Each batch of crystals is far from pure, but if each batch is dissolved and the process is repeated, that helps. Each crystallization leaves behind some left-over solvent (called "mother-liquor") with a portion of the compounds still dissolved in it. Certain mother-liquors are combined with certain batches of crystals according to a definite system, and the process is repeated over and over. Eventually, the reasonably pure compounds of the

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various rare earth metals are separated.

I say, *eventually*. Sometimes, 40,000 separate crystallizations are required.

The time and patience required was unbelievable. Can you wonder that before World War II, hardly anything was known of the properties of the rare earth metals? That hardly any uses were found for them? That chemists kept thinking of them as "rare"?

Then came the wartime research on uranium fission. It turned out that some of the products of fission were radioactive isotopes of at least six of the rare earth elements. It was very important to identify and study these. In order to be studied, they had to be separated from one another. What's more, the separation had to be fast, as the isotopes were breaking down continuously. There was no time for 40,000 recrystallizations.

Beginning in 1942, then, use was made of ion-exchange resins. These are brittle amber-like substances with large organic molecules. Each resin molecule contains a number of acid groups that can combine with atoms of the different rare earth metals to form salts.

The ion-exchange resin, in the form of little pellets, is put into a long vertical glass tube and a solution of rare earth compounds is allowed to trickle down through the resin. The resin captures the rare earth metals at once. The metals remain at the top of the column. The liquid that comes out at the bottom of the column (which is, of course, equipped with a stopcock) has no rare earth metals in it.

The next step is to run a solution containing ammonium citrate and citric acid down the column. The citric acid will combine with the rare earth metals just as the resin will. There is a kind of a tug of war for the atoms of the rare earth metals. As the citric acid trickles downward, they are pulled along with it somewhat.

Furthermore, the tug of war is differently balanced for each particular rare earth metal. Those with higher atomic numbers are more strongly attracted by the citric acid than the others and follow a little faster as the citric acid trickles downward. Each rare earth metal follows at its own particular rate. If the column is long enough, this means they gradually move away from one another and separate completely. (It is just like runners in a race, who start from the same position, but who separate more and more as the race progresses, the fastest runners forging out front.)

By the time the rare earth metals trickle out the bottom

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of the tube, each can be up to 99.9 per cent pure.

The rare earth metal situation has thus been revolutionized. At least two plants now exist which can supply sizable quantities of any rare earth metal you wish at a reasonable price and in a high state of purity. Chemists are beginning to discover that a bit of this rare earth metal or that added to certain alloys result in improved properties of one kind or another.

It may not be long before we'll be using rare earth metals in every day objects of all sorts and wonder that they were ever considered rare or useless.

As a matter of fact, the name "rare earth" is already completely out of fashion. Up-to-date chemists refer to the elements as the "lanthanides" after the name of the first metal of the series. They're "unrare earths" now, you see.

Table I - *Occurrence of the Rare Earth Metals in the Earth's Crust*

Element	Atomic No.	Parts per Million	Element	Atomic No.	Parts per Million
Lanthanum	57	18.3	Terbium	65	0.91
Cerium	53	41.6	Dysprosium	66	4.47
Praseodymium	59	5.53	Holmium	67	1.15
Neodymium	60	23.9	Erbium	68	2.47
Samarium	62	6.47	Thulium	69	0.20
Europium	63	1.06	Ytterbium	70	2.66
Gadolinium	64	6.36	Lutetium	71	0.75

NOTE: A fifteenth rare earth metal, technetium (atomic number, 61) is radioactive and does not exist in the soil, although it has been prepared in the laboratory.

Table II - *Occurrence of Some Other Metals in the Earth's Crust*

Element	Atomic No.	Parts per Million	Element	Atomic No.	Parts per Million
Nickel	28	100	Iodine	53	0.3
Copper	29	70	Platinum	78	0.005
Zinc	30	80	Gold	79	0.001
Silver	47	0.02	Mercury	80	0.5
Tin	50	40	Lead	82	16

NOTE: The data for these tables comes from Geochemistry by V. M. Goldschmidt, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1954.

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the shining cow

by ALEX JAMES

Robbie whined and acted like his eyes were burning, as if he'd gotten dust or something even stranger into them....

ZACK STEWART stared sleepily into the bottom of his cracked coffee cup as his wife began to gather the breakfast dishes.

Mrs. Stewart was a huge, methodical woman, seasoned to the drudgery of a farm wife. Quite methodically she'd arise every morning at 4:00 A.M. with her husband and each would do their respective chores until long after the sun had set on their forty acre farm.

"You've jest got to find Junius today, Zack," Mrs. Stewart spoke worriedly, "Lord only knows her condition, not being milked since yesterday morning."

"Yeah, I know, Ma," Zack said wearily as he rose from the table, "I'll search for her again in the north woods, but if she ain't there this time, I give up."

A dog suddenly howled outside. There was a brief instant when neither moved, then Zack suddenly exclaimed, "It's Robbie!" and dashed outside.

In the light from the open doorway Zack saw the dog

This is NOT a story about sinister aliens from outer space. This is simply the story of what happened to poor Junius when she found herself much too close to a Flying Saucer, long enough so she could be analyzed and long enough to cause some strange happenings on that farm.

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creeping along on his haunches, howling and whining, and scratching frantically at his tear-streaming eyes.

"Skunk finally got ya, eh boy?" Zack spoke sympathetically as the dog, fawning, came closer.

"Stay away, Robbie, stay away now!" He ordered the dog. Robbie whined and scratched again, furiously. Zack sniffed cautiously, expecting any moment the pungent smell of skunk fluid to hit his nostrils. He sensed nothing but the clean, fresh smell of the morning air, so he leaned closer. Within a foot of Robbie, he sniffed again. Nothing. He realized it wasn't a skunk that caused Robbie's eyes to burn. He knelt down and took the dog's head tenderly in his rough, calloused hands and examined his eyes. They were bloodshot and watery. He took some water from the well and dashed it into the dog's eyes as Robbie struggled.

"Hold still, boy, I'm trying to help ya." Zack soothed. He took out a blue work bandanna and wiped tenderly around Robbie's eyes.

"What did it, boy? How did it happen?" Zack asked. Robbie merely whined.

"What's wrong with him?" Mrs. Stewart, broom in hand, asked from the doorway.

"Don't rightly know," Zack patted the dog, "acts like he got something in his eyes."

"Skunk?"

"Naw," Zack shook his head, "He don't smell. Something else."

"Cat?"

"No scratches, either. He acts like they're burnin' him, like he got dust or somethin' in 'em."

"Well, take him out to the barn and you better get after Junius."

"Yeah, Ma. Come on, Robbie." He led Robbie to the barn and made him lie on a bed of hay in one of the stalls then returned to the kichen for his lantern. He put on his thick denim jacket and work cap and turned to his wife.

"If she ain't in the woods, I'll come back and git the truck and drive over to the Leemers and see if he seen her."

He left the kitchen and shone the lantern around in the farmyard to get his bearings, then headed for the north end of his farm. He could see the faint glimmer of dawn in the east, more pronounced in the northeast, and even more so due north. He rubbed his eyes. A much brighter glow outlined the treetops in the north woods, that made the dawn on the eastern horizon look like a dirty gray streak. His first thought was of fire, but there was no smoke, no flame.

Zack walked dazedly toward the woods, his eyes glued to the light above the trees. Soon he was in the woods, and he could see the

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brightness extended down through the trees from the sky, on the other side of the woods. He approached cautiously as the light grew brighter, and came to the clearing where it was most intense. A thick bush obstructed his view, and Zack moved it aside then uttered a hoarse gasp, as he clutched at his eyes.

For a moment he felt he was dreaming. He squinted between the slits of his fingers. The glow was still piercing, but he could see the brightly lit Junius, radiating blue-white light, nibbling at the sparse grass in the clearing. Zack stood transfixed, his eyes widening behind his fingers. He felt the tears and the burning sensation, and squinted tightly, turning his head from the unbelievable scene.

Zack didn't remember his return to the farmhouse, or incoherently trying to explain to his wife the scene he had witnessed. A stiff jolt of elderberry wine drove off the jitters and reasoning returned. His wife sat patiently, eyeing him oddly, as Zack muttered over and over again, "It's unbelievable! It's unbelievable!"

Mrs. Stewart rose. "I'm going out and see fer myself. And Zack, if yer lying to me—"

Zack jumped from the chair, barring her way.

"Believe me, maw, it's true. Don't go out there. It might be too much fer ya."

"It's the craziest thing I ever heard." Mrs. Stewart scoffed, "A cow that shines like the sun!"

"Look, maw, will ya jest come with me as fer as the pasture, you can see the glow from there, and mebbe that might convince ya."

"Yes, yes I will," Mrs. Stewart jerked off her apron, "I declare Zack, I think these chores are getting the best of ya."

They walked to the pasture, their eyes on the tree tops of the north woods. A faint glow began to appear.

"See! See!" Zack pointed, laughing crazily.

"Let's get closer, looks like a fire." Mrs. Stewart said.

"Ain't no fire," Zack's tone was angry, "It's Junius and she's all lit up like a Christmas tree."

"Zack, now you stop that kinda crazy talk. There's a reason behind everything, and I'm sure there's one fer this."

"There is a reason, maw. Junius. She's got the whole clearing lit up like the noon day sun. Lord only knows how she got that way, but she's shining out there like a great big light bulb, only brighter."

Mrs. Stewart quickened her pace towards the clearing.

"I'm going to see fer myself," she said determinedly,

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"and put an end to this foolish nonsense."

"Alright, maw," Zack spoke resignedly, "if yer mind's set. But I'm warning ya, ya better squint yer eyes tight. She's too bright to look at. Poor Robbie must have got too good a look at her."

Mrs. Stewart approached the clearing ahead of her husband and moved the same bush aside, that had obstructed her husband's view. Her gaze caught the brightly radiating figure of Junius, and Mrs. Stewart screamed, clasping her face with her hands. Zack had his head turned, but he groped for his wife, grasped her arm and led her from the clearing.

It's too crazy to believe Zack," she whispered in awe; "What are we going to do? What has happened to poor Junius?"

"I don't know what happened to her," Zack answered," but I know what I'm going to do about it. I'm going to call the University and git them scientist fellas down here."

"You suppose they can git close enough to milk the poor thing?" Mrs. Stewart clasped her hands in frustration, "she's probably in misery."

Zack shook his head. "Ain't no tellin' what they're liable to do after they seen her. Most likely they'll want to ship her to the University to examine her and see how she got that way."

"Why don't we call the Vet'nar'n?" Mrs. Stewart asked, "it might be some kind of new disease."

"It ain't no disease, maw. It's something nobody in the whole world ever seen or heard of before. I jest hope I can convince them University fellas to come down here."

"Don't you think you better tie Junius so she won't stray?"

"Better wait and see what them scientists say. Besides, if she strays, all we gotta do is follow the light!"

Zack did the most important chores and at eight A.M. on the dot he called the State University.

The operator at the switchboard answered sleepily.

"Good morning, State University."

"Mornin' man. I'd like to talk to one of them scientist fellas."

"To whom in particular did you wish to speak?"

"Any of 'em that ain't busy. I got somethin' important to tell 'em."

"If I knew what it was about," the operator was becoming irritated, "I'd connect you with the right party."

Zack hesitated, reluctant to give his startling news to a mere operator. Instead, he hedged. "Well, who would

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have charge of things that light up?"

"Oh, you want the electrical engineering lab. Just a moment sir."

There was a series of clicks and buzzes in the earpiece then Zack heard a man's deep voice.

"Hello."

"Hello," Zack replied, "this the electrical engineering lab?"

"Yessir, that's right."

"Well, my name is Zack Stewart and I own a forty acre farm on the Canal Road just outside of Smithville."

"I'm Professor Donnell, can I help you?"

"Yeath," Zack took a deep breath then began, "my cow Junius was missing since yesterday morning and this morning when I went out to search for her again, I found her."

"Mr. Stewart," Professor Donnell's voice was impatient, "I'm a very busy man with a heavy class schedule. Why in the world would I care if you found your cow or not?"

"You'd care if you knew how I found her."

"Alright, Mr. Stewart, "how did you find your cow, with some new kind of radar?"

"Nossir, I found her by following the bright light in the north wood and when I got there, there was Junius lit up like a neon sign."

"Mr. Stewart, are you drunk?"

"I knew you wouldn't believe me. All I can say is, come see for—"

Zack heard a sudden click then an immediate buzzing. Professor Donnell had hung up.

He had no sooner replaced the phone when there was a pounding on the door. He opened it and saw six state troopers and four important looking gentlemen in civilian dress. A trooper who looked as though he might be in charge, spoke to Zack.

"Sir, we don't want you or your wife to get panicky, but we have reason to believe that something strange is going on in your woods. These men are from the atomic research laboratory at the University and they are convinced that a flying saucer has landed out there."

"It ain't no flying saucer." Zack spoke wearily.

"It isn't?" one of the gentlemen asked, disappointed, "then what is it?"

"It's Junius, my cow."

"Your—WHAT?" the state trooper exclaimed incredulously, "are you nuts?"

Angrily, Zack jerked his thumb in the direction of the north woods.

"Jest go out there and see fer yourself and then tell me I'm nuts."

They hurriedly left the house, looking back skeptically at Zack.

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Zack and his wife stood in the doorway, watching them until they were out of sight in the woods.

"You watch 'em come busting back here in a minute, maw."

In a few moments they saw the men scrambling out of the woods, rushing madly for the house, holding their eyes.

"Now I don't have to convince anybody." Zack smirked.

By the time they reached the porch, they were all talking excitedly and rubbing their eyes. The state trooper in charge pulled Zack aside.

"Mister," he asked ominously, "what the hell happened to that cow?"

"I don't know," Zack spoke with sarcasm, "jest the way I found her."

The important looking civilian bustled past the patrolman and confronted Zack.

"I'd like to use your phone," his hands moved nervously, "where is it?"

Zack showed him and the man rushed to it and hastily dialed a number.

"This is Professor Jonathon Sims, Nuclear Physicist at State University. Put me through immediately to the Governor. It's very important."

There was a slight pause as Sims drummed impatiently on the phone.

"Hello! Hello, Governor? Professor Sims. I'd like a contingent of National Guardsmen around the farm of Zack Stewart on the old Canal Rd. A most astonding thing has happened out here. For the welfare of the Public, I urgently request this farm be placed under tight security check at once and the Federal Government notified immediately."

"Hey now, wait a minute Mister—" Zack protested.

Sims motioned him into silence, his ear glued to the phone.

"Sir," he hesitated, glancing at the group sideways, "you won't believe this until you see it. But we have positive proof a saucer has landed here. Mr. Stewart's cow is radiating intense blue and white light, the kind that has been associated with the glow of flying saucers."

Sims paused, listening to the Governor. Zack saw him fidget and stick a forefinger in his collar.

"Honestly Sir! I am not drunk! The cow is radiating light."

"See?" Zack grinned at him. "now ya know how I felt."

Sims ignored him, concentrating on the phone.

"Yessir, there is a State Trooper here." He turned to the one in charge. "He wants to speak to you." The Trooper took the receiver.

"Hello Governor. Sgt. Les Johnson of the Highway Patrol." Pause. "That's right sir. There's a number of people

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here who can swear to it. Yessir." This time the Trooper fidgeted. "I seen it too. Blue-white light, yessir. Nossir, we are not having a drinking party. The light was reported by the pilot of the Continental Airways early this morning and we investigated. Yessir." He held the receiver towards Sims. "He wants to talk to you again."

The Governor was finally convinced something indeed strange was happening at the Stewart place, but being a solid citizen and faithful servant of the people who elected him, he couldn't believe the fantastic story the Professor and the Trooper told him. He decided to see for himself and rang for his chauffeur after his telephone conversation with Professor Sims.

Meanwhile, Mrs. Stewart turned to Sims.

"Will you please tell us if Junius can be milked?"

"I really don't know yet, Mrs. Stewart. I'll have to investigate the area for harmful radio-activity first, then I'll have to check the cow, herself. Pardon me." He turned to the phone again.

Trying to keep his voice and emotion under control, Professor Sims called his laboratory at the University and ordered among other technical equipment, a geiger counter, a gamma ray detector, a portable lead shield, body and temperature thermometers, portable X-ray machine, and a dozen pairs of smoked glasses.

The equipment arrived within the hour, and Professor Sims distributed it among his assistants with his instructions. It was understood that he alone would approach Junius wearing his smoked glasses and carrying the protective lead shield, to make the initial test. If his tests proved that Junius could be safely approached, he would go back for the others.

"You look like one of them flying saucer fellas, yerself," Zack laughed, seeing Professor Sims donned in the lead shield and the dark glasses.

Sims waved at the crowd in the farmyard and walked awkwardly toward the glow in the north wood, less pronounced now in the daylight. They watched until his retreating figure disappeared into the woods, and they were still watching the spot for what seemed a long time afterward. One of the assistants fidgeted and looked at his watch.

"He's been in there twenty minutes. Wonder what he's doing?"

"I hope he's milking her." Mrs. Stewart said hopefully.

Zack chuckled as a thought struck him.

"What's so funny, Zack?" His wife asked.

"Junius," Zack's chuckle

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bubbled into laughter, "will be the first cow to give radiated milk."

Finally, after another fifteen minutes, they saw Professor Sims emerge from the woods. As he came across the pasture they could see that his smoked glasses were propped above his eyebrows and he was concentrating on a small notebook in his hand, shaking his head from time to time.

When he finally joined the waiting group, he was flooded with questions.

He gestured them into silence.

"Please, I cannot answer any questions as yet until I have consulted with my assistants. Sgt. Johnson, will you please have your men guard the clearing while we hold a conference?"

"Is it safe to get that close to her?" The trooper asked, unbelieving.

"I can assure you that it is. There is just a negligible amount of radio-activity present, and no more ultra violet rays then there are in an average sun lamp. But you must wear your glasses." Turning to his aides he said, "Come gentlemen," and they followed him into the farmhouse.

"Can she be milked?" Mrs. Stewart wailed after them.

"What a gadawful situation." Zack muttered, grabbing a pitchfork and heading for the barn.

The scientists seated themselves around the big dining room table and faced Professor Sims.

"Gentlemen, it's the most amazing thing that ever happened. That cow is glowing out there like a miniature atomic pile, and under the circumstances as we know them, should be deader than a door nail, but there she stands, shining like the morning sun, chewing her cud and just mooing away as if nothing happened."

"What is your theory, Professor?" One of the assistants asked.

"I have one, but it's utterly fantastic." Sims answered.

"So is that cow out there. Let's hear it!"

"Do you remember how much more frequent saucer sightings were reported in this area alone?" Sims asked. All the assistants nodded their heads.

"Well," Sims went on, "I am of the opinion that a saucer actually landed out there and they came across the cow by accident. They either shot her with some sort of radium ray gun, or some luminous substance unknown to us."

"Why didn't Junius die?" One of the assistants asked.

Sims shook his head. "They wished to examine her. You see, gentlemen, whatever it was, it served a threefold purpose. It made her luminous,

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immobile and—" Sims placed both hands on the table and leaned forward for emphasis, "transparent."

There was a gasp and exclamations.

"Transparent? how?—"

"I was within a foot of the cow, felt her hide, and through the glasses I could see the skeletal frame, the chest cavity, the heart beating within, the entire intestinal tract, much, much more clearly than could be seen by the best X-ray."

As if on command, the assistants all rose simultaneously.

"Sit down, gentlemen, the cow isn't going anywhere. We shall have to face this situation with sound scientific reasoning. There will be a closed van here soon to pick up Junius and haul her to the laboratory where we can examine her more thoroughly. Now my belief is that the saucer took off in haste, such great haste that they forgot to extinguish poor Junius. I believe they will be back looking for her, therefore we shall have to return her tonight and conceal ourselves around the area and watch."

"Splendid idea, Professor Sims!" One of the assistants exclaimed.

Yelling voices in the farmyard caught their attention. They saw Sgt. Johnson through the dining room window, coming across the yard, yelling and pointing to the sky. Sims rushed from the house, met Johnson, grasped him by the shoulders, shaking him.

"What happened, man, what happened?" Sims asked.

"Black light, black light!" Johnson shouted, pointing skyward. Sims looked up. Nothing but the serene blue of the summer sky and an occasional bird caught his eye.

Sims shook him again, more roughly.

"Speak, man, what happened?"

"Black light flashed down on the cow! Blackest light you ever saw!"

The group gathered around him in the yard, trying to make sense out of what he said. So engrossed were they with his babblings, that none but Mrs. Stewart was aware of the fact that Junius had entered the farmyard and was eyeing them curiously.

"Junius!" She exclaimed.

"Moooo!"

The crowd looked up to see the ordinary, unlit Junius standing calmly by the gate.

"Hurry and get the milk pail, Zack, Junius is all right now!" Mrs. Stewart yelled happily to her husband, as Professor Sims and his assistants led the hysterical trooper into the house.

High over the horizon, a faint, silvery disc was disappearing at fantastic speed into outer space.

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it's a small solar system

by ALLAN HOWARD

Soon the three representatives of earth were walking shoulder to shoulder, the Captain first to touch soil.

KNOW HIM?

Well you might say I practically grew up with him. He was my hero in those days. I thought few wiser or greater men ever lived. In my eyes he was greater than Babe Ruth, Lindy, or the President.

Of course, time, and my growing up caused me to bring him into a perspective that I felt to be more consonant with his true position in his field of endeavor. When he died his friends mourned for f o n d remembrance of t h i n g s past, but privately many of them felt that he had outlived his best days. Now with this glorious vindication, I wonder how many of them are still alive to feel the twinge of conscience...

Oh we're d e l i g h t e d of course, but it seems incredible even today to us elated oldsters. Although we were always his staunchest admirers, in retrospect we can see now that no one believed more than we that he did it strictly for the dollar. It is likely there was always a small corps of starry-eyed adolescents who found the whole improbable saga entirely believable, or at least half be-

Frederik Pohl wrote recently about the time, when he was young, when he spent more time in Barsoom than in Brooklyn. Allan Howard, Director of the Eastern Science Fiction Association in Newark, takes us back to those nostalgic days in this vignette of man's first hours on Mars.

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lieved it might be partly true. The attitude of the rest of us ranged from a patronizing disparagment that we thought was expected of us, through grudging admiration, to out-and-out enthusiasm.

Certainly if anybody had taken the trouble to consider it—and why should they have?—the landing of the first manned ship on our satellite seemed to render him as obsolete as a horde of other lesser and even greater lights. At any rate it was inevitable that the conquest of the moon would be merely a stepping-stone to more distant points.

Oh no, I had nothing to do with the selection of the Red Planet. Coming in as head of Project P-4 in it's latter stages, as I did when Dr. Fredericks died, the selection had already been made. Yes, it's quite likely I may have been plugging for Mars below the conscious level. A combination of chance, expediency and popular demand made Mars the next target, rather than Venus, which was, in some ways, the more logical goal. I would have given anything to have gone, but the metaphorical stout heart that one reporter once credited me with is not the same as an old man's actual fatty heart.

And there were heartbreak years ahead before the *Goddard* was finally ready. During this time he slipped further into obscurity while big, important things were happening all around us. You're right, that one really big creation of his *is* bigger than ever. It has passed into the language, and meant employment for thousands of people. Too few of them have even heard of him. Of course he was still known and welcomed by a small circle of acquaintances, but to the world at large he was truly a "forgotten man".

It is worthy of note that one of the oldest of these acquaintances was present at blast-off time. He happened to be the grandfather of a certain competent young crewman. The old man was a proud figure during the brief ceremonies and his eyes filled with tears as the mighty rocket climbed straight up on it's fiery tail. He remained there gazing up at the sky long after it had vanished.

He was heard to murmur, "I am glad the kid could go, but it is just a lark to him. He never had a "sense of wonder". How could he—nobody reads anymore".

Afterward, his senile emotions betraying him, he broke down completely and had to be led from the field. It is rumored he did not live long after that.

The *Goddard* drove on until Mars filled the viz-screen. It was planned to make at least a half-dozen braking passes around the planet for observational purposes before the

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actual business of bringing the ship in for landfall began. As expected the atmosphere proved to be thin. The speculated dead-sea areas, oddly enough, turned out to be just that. To the surprise of some, it was soon evident that Mars possessed, or had possessed, a high civilization. The *canali* of Schiaparelli were indeed broad waterways stretching from pole to pole, too regular to be anything but the work of intelligence. But most wonderful of all were the scattered, but fairly numerous large, walled cities that dotted the world. Everybody was excited, eager to land and start exercising their specialties.

One of the largest of these cities was selected more or less at random. It was decided to set down just outside, yet far enough from the walls to avoid any possibility of damage from the landing jets in the event the city was inhabited. Even if deserted, the entire scientific personnel would have raised a howl that would have been heard back on Earth if just a section of wall was scorched. When planet-fall was completed and observers had time to scan the surroundings it was seen that the city was very much alive.

"What keeps them up!" marvelled Kopchainski, the aeronautics and rocketry authority.

The sky swarmed with ships of strange design. The walls were crowded with inhabitants, too far away for detailed observation. Even as they looked an enormous gate opened and a procession of mounted figures emerged. In the event the place was deserted the Captain would have had the honor of being the first to touch Martian soil. While atmospheric and other checks were being run he gave orders for the previously decided alternative. Captain, semanticist and anthropologist would make the First Contact.

With all checks agreeing that it was safe to open locks, soon the three representatives of Earth were walking shoulder to shoulder down the ramp. It was apparent that the two scientists purposely missed stride inches from the end, so that it was the Captain's foot that actually touched ground first.

The cavalcade—though these beasties were certainly not horses—was now near enough to the ship for details to be seen. Surprise and wonderment filled the crew, for while the multi-legged steeds were as alien as anyone might expect to find on an alien world, the riders were very definitely humanoid. Briefly, brightly and barbarically trapped as they were by earthly standards, they seemed to be little distinguishable from homegrown homo saps.

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The approaching company appeared to be armed mainly with swords and lances, but also in evidence were some tubular affairs that could very well be some sort of projectile discharging device. The Captain suddenly felt unaccountably warm. It was a heavy responsibility—he hoped these Martians wouldn't be the type of madmen who believed in the "shoot first, inquire later" theory.

Even as he stood there, outwardly calm but jittering internally the Martian riders pulled up ten feet from the Earthmen. Their leader, tall, dark haired, and subtly lighter in hue than his companions, dismounted and approached the Captain. With outstretched hand he took the Captain's in a firm grip.

Let it be recorded here, to the shame of an Earth where reading for pleasure is virtually a lost pastime, that not one man on the *Goddard* realized the significance of what followed.

"How do you do?" he said in perfect English, with an unmistakable trace of Southern accent.

"Welcome to Barsoom! My name is John Carter."

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happy ending

by MACK REYNOLDS and FREDRIC BROWN

Sometimes the queerly shaped Venusian trees seemed to talk to him, but their voices were soft. They were loyal people.

THERE were four men in the life boat that came down from the space cruiser. Three of them were still in the uniform of the Galactic Guards.

The fourth sat in the prow of the small craft looking down at their goal, hunched and silent, bundled up in a greatcoat against the coolness of space—a greatcoat which he would never need again after this morning. The brim of his hat was pulled down far over his forehead, and he studied the nearing shore through dark lensed glasses. Bandages, as though for a broken jaw, covered most of the lower part of his face.

He realized suddenly that the dark glasses, now that they had left the cruiser, were unnecessary. He slipped them off. After the cinematographic grays his eyes had seen through these lenses for so long, the brilliance of the color below him was almost like a blow. He blinked, and looked again.

They were rapidly settling toward a shoreline, a beach. The sand was a dazzling, unbelievable white such as had never been on his home planet. Blue the sky and water,

A world had collapsed around this man—a world that would never shout his praises again. The burned out cities were still and dead, the twisted bodies and twisted souls giving him their last salute in death. And now he was alone, alone surrounded by memories, alone and waiting . . .

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and green the edge of the fantastic jungle. There was a flash of red in the green, as they came still closer, and he realized suddenly that it must be a *marigee*, the semi-intelligent Venusian parrot once so popular as pets throughout the solar system.

Throughout the system blood and steel had fallen from the sky and ravished the planets, but now it fell no more.

And now this. Here in this forgotten portion of an almost completely destroyed world it had not fallen at all.

Only in some place like this, alone, was safety for him. Elsewhere—anywhere—imprisonment or, more likely, death. There was danger, even here. Three of the crew of the space cruiser knew. Perhaps, someday, one of them would talk. Then they would come for him, even here.

But that was a chance he could not avoid. Nor were the odds bad, for three people out of a whole solar system knew where he was. And those three were loyal fools.

The life boat came gently to rest. The hatch swung open and he stepped out and walked a few paces up the beach. He turned and waited while the two spacemen who had guided the craft brought his chest out and carried it across the beach and to the corrugated tin shack just at the edge of the trees. That shack had once been a space-radar relay station. Now the equipment it had held was long gone, the antenna mast taken down. But the shack still stood. It would be his home for a while. A long while. The two men returned to the lifeboat preparatory to leaving.

And now the captain stood facing him, and the captain's face was a rigid mask. It seemed with an effort that the captain's right arm remained at his side, but that effort had been ordered. No salute.

The captain's voice, too, was rigid with unemotion. "Number One..."

"Silence!" And then, less bitterly. "Come further from the boat before you again let your tongue run loose. Here." They had reached the shack.

"You are right, Number..."

"No. I am no longer Number One. You must continue to think of me as *Mister* Smith, your cousin, whom you brought here for the reasons you explained to the under-officers, before you surrender your ship. If you *think* of me so, you will be less likely to slip in your speech."

"There is nothing further I can do—Mister Smith?"

"Nothing. Go now."

"And I am ordered to surrender the—"

"There are no orders. The war is over, lost. I would suggest thought as to what spaceport you put into. In some

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you may receive humane treatment. In others—."

The captain nodded. "In others, there is great hatred. Yes. That is all?"

"That is all. And Captain, your running of the blockade, your securing of fuel enroute, have constituted a deed of high valor. All I can give you in reward is my thanks. But now go. Goodbye."

"Not goodbye," the captain blurted impulsively, "but *hasta la vista, auf Wiedersehen, until the day*...you will permit me, or the last time to address you and salute?"

The man in the greatcoat shrugged. "As you will."

Click of heels and a salute that once greeted the Ceasars, and later the pseudo-aryan of the 20th Century, and, but yesterday, he who was now known as *the last of the dictators*. "Farewell, Number One!"

"Farewell," he answered emotionlessly.

Mr. Smith, a blacked dot on the dazzling white sand, watched the lifeboat disappear up into the blue, finally into the haze of the upper atmosphere of Venus. That eternal haze that would always be there to mock his failure and his bitter solitude.

The slow days snarled by, and the sun shone dimly, and the *marigees* screamed in the early dawn and all day and at sunset, and sometimes there were the six legged *baroons*, monkey-like in the trees, that gibbered at him. And the rains came and went away again.

At nights there were drums in the distance. Not the martial roll of marching, nor yet a threatening note of savage hate. Just drums, many miles away, throbbing rhythm for native dances or exorcizing, perhaps, the forest-night demons. He assumed these Venusians had their superstitions, all other races had. There was no threat, for him, in that throbbing that was like the beating of the jungle's heart.

Mr. Smith knew that, for although his choice of destinations had been a hasty choice, yet there had been time for him to read the available reports. The natives were harmless and friendly. A Terran missionary had lived among them some time ago—before the outbreak of the war. They were a simple, weak race. They seldom went far from their villages; the space-radar operator who had once occupied the shack reported that he had never seen one of them.

So there would be no difficulty in avoiding the natives, nor danger if he did encounter them.

Nothing to worry about, except the bitterness.

Not the bitterness of regret, but of defeat. Defeat at the hands of the defeated. The damned Martians who

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came back after he had driven them halfway across their damned arid planet. The Jupiter Satellite Confederation landing endlessly on the home planet, sending their vast armadas of spacecraft daily and nightly to turn his mighty cities into dust. In spite of everything; in spite of his score of ultra vicious secret weapons and the last desperate efforts of his weakened armies most of whose men were under twenty or over forty.

The treachery even in his own army, among his own generals and admirals. The turn of Luna, that had been the end.

His people would rise again. But not, now after Armageddon, in his lifetime. Not under him, nor another like him. The last of the dictators.

Hated by a solar system, and hating it.

It would have been intolerable, save that he was alone. He had foreseen that—the need for solitude. Alone, he was still Number One. The presence of others would have forced recognition of his miserably changed status. Alone, his pride was undamaged. His ego was intact.

The long days, and the *marigees'* screams, the slithering swish of the surf, the ghost-quiet movements of the *baroons* in the trees and the raucousness of their shrill voices. Drums.

Those sounds, and those alone. But perhaps silence would have been worse.

For the times of silence were louder. Times, he would pace the beach at night and overhead would be the roar of jets and rockets, the ships that had roared over New Albuquerque, his capitol, in those last days before he had fled. The crump of bombs and the screams and the blood, and the flat voices of his folding generals.

Those were the days when the waves of hatred from the conquered peoples beat upon his country as the waves of a stormy sea beat upon crumbling cliffs. Leagues back of the battered lines, you could *feel* that hate and vengeance as a tangible thing, a thing that thickened the air, that made breathing difficult and talking futile.

And the spacecraft, the jets, the rockets, the damnable rockets, more every day and every night, and ten coming for every one shot down. Rocket ships raining hell from the sky, havoc and chaos and the end of hope.

And then he knew that he had been hearing another sound, hearing it often and long at a time. It was a voice that shouted invective and ranted hatred and glorified the steel might of his planet and the destiny of a man and a people.

It was his own voice, and it beat back the waves from the

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white shore, it stopped their wet encroachment upon this, his domain. It screamed back at the *baroons* and they were silent. And at times he laughed, and the *marigees* laughed. Sometimes, the queerly shaped Venusian trees talked too, but their voices were quieter. The trees were submissive, they were good subjects.

Sometimes, fantastic thoughts went through his head. The race of trees, the pure race of trees that never interbred, that stood firm always. Someday the trees—

But that was just a dream, a fancy. More real were the *marigees* and the *kifs*. They were the ones who persecuted him. There was the *marigee* who would shriek *"All is lost!"* He had shot at it a hundred times with his needle gun, but always it flew away unharmed. Sometimes it did not even fly away.

"All is lost!"

At last he wasted no more needle darts. He stalked it to strangle it with his bare hands. That was better. On what might have been the thousandth try, he caught it and killed it, and there was warm blood on his hands and feathers were flying.

That should have ended it, but it didn't. Now there were a dozen *marigees* that screamed that all was lost. Perhaps there had been a dozen all along. Now he merely shook his fist at them or threw stones.

The *kifs*, the Venusian equivalent of the Terran ant, stole his food. But that did not matter; there was plenty of food. There had been a cache of it in the shack, meant to restock a space-cruiser, and never used. The *kifs* would not get at it until he opened a can, but then, unless he ate it all at once, they ate whatever he left. That did not matter. There were plenty of cans. And always fresh fruit from the jungle. Always in season, for there were no seasons here, except the rains.

But the *kifs* served a purpose for him. They kept him sane, by giving him something tangible, something inferior, to hate.

Oh, it wasn't hatred, at first. Mere annoyance. He killed them in a routine sort of way at first. But they kept coming back. Always there were *kifs*. In his larder, wherever he did it. In his bed. He sat the legs of the cot in dishes of gasoline, but the *kifs* still got in. Perhaps they dropped from the ceiling, although he never caught them doing it.

They bothered his sleep. He'd feel them running over him, even when he'd spent an hour picking the bed clean of them by the light of the carbide lantern. They scurried with tickling little feet and he could not sleep.

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He grew to hate them, and the very misery of his nights made his days more tolerable by giving them an increasing purpose. A pogrom against the *kifs*. He sought out their holes by patiently following one bearing a bit of food, and he poured gasoline into the hole and the earth around it, taking satisfaction in the thought of the writhings in agony below. He went about hunting *kifs*, to step on them. To stamp them out. He must have killed millions of *kifs*.

But always there were as many left. Never did their number seem to diminish in the slightest. Like the Martians—but unlike the Martians, they did not fight back.

Theirs was the passive resistance of a vast productivity that bred *kifs* ceaselessly, overwhelmingly, billions to replace millions. Individual *kifs* could be killed, and he took savage satisfaction in their killing, but he knew his methods were useless save for the pleasure and the purpose they gave him. Sometimes the pleasure would pall in the shadow of its futility, and he would dream of mechanized means of killing them.

He read carefully what little material there was in his tiny library about the *kif*. They were astonishingly like the ants of Terra. So much that there had been speculation about their relationship—that didn't interest him. How could they be killed, *en masse?* Once a year, for a brief period, they took on the characteristics of the army ants of Terra. They came from their holes in endless numbers and swept everything before them in their devouring march. He wet his lips when he read that. Perhaps the opportunity would come then to destroy, to destroy, *and destroy*.

Almost, Mr. Smith forgot people and the solar system and what had been. Here in this new world, there was only he and the *kifs*. The *baroons* and the *marigees* didn't count. They had no order and no system. The *kifs*—

In the intensity of his hatred there slowly filtered through a grudging admiration. The *kifs* were true totalitarins. They practiced what he had preached to a mightier race, practiced it with a thoroughness beyond the kind of man to comprehend.

Theirs the complete submergence of the individual to the state, theirs the complete ruthlessness of the true conqueror, the perfect selfless bravery of the true soldier.

But they got into his bed, into his clothes, into his food.

They crawled with intolerable tickling feet.

Nights he walked the beach, and that night was one of the noisy nights. There were high-flying, high-whining jet-craft up there in the moonlight sky and their

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shadows dappled the black water of the sea. The planes, the rockets, the jet-craft, they were what had ravaged his cities, had turned his railroads into twisted steel, had dropped their H-Bombs on his most vital factories.

He shook his fist at them and shrieked imprecations at the sky.

And when he had ceased shouting, there were voices on the beach. Conrad's voice in his ear, as it had sounded that day when Conrad had walked into the palace, white-faced, and forgotten the salute. "There is a breakthrough at Denver, Number One! Toronto and Monterey are in danger. And in the other hemispheres—" His voice cracked. "—the damned Martians and the traitors from Luna are driving over the Argentine. Others have landed near New Petrograd. It is a rout. All is lost!"

Voices crying, "Number One, *hail!* Number One, *hail!*"

A sea of hysterical voices. "Number One, *hail!* Number One—"

A voice that was louder, higher, more frenetic than any of the others. His memory of his own voice, calculated but inspired, as he'd heard it on play-backs of his own speeches.

The voices of children chanting, "To thee, O Number One—" He couldn't remember the rest of the words, but they had been beautiful words. That had been at the public school meet in the New Los Angeles. How strange that he should remember, here and now, the very tone of his voice and inflection, the shining wonder in their children's eyes. Children only, but they were willing to kill and die, *for him*, convinced that all that was needed to cure the ills of the race was a suitable leader to follow.

"All is lost!"

And suddenly the monster jet-craft were swooping downward and starkly he realized what a clear target he presented, here against the white moonlit beach. They must see him.

The crescendo of motors as he ran, sobbing now in fear, for the cover of the jungle. Into the screening shadow of the giant trees, and the sheltering blackness.

He stumbled and fell, was up and running again. And now his eyes could see in the dimmer moonlight that filtered through the branches overhead. Stirrings there, in the branches. Stirrings and voices in the night. Voices in and of the night. Whispers and shrieks of pain. Yes, he'd shown them pain, and now their tortured voices ran with him through the knee-deep night-wet grass among the trees.

The night was hideous with noise. Red noises, an almost

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tangible din that he could nearly *feel* as well as he could see and hear it. And after a while his breath came raspingly, and there was a thumping sound that was the beating of his heart and the beating of the night.

And then, he could run no longer, and he clutched a tree to keep from falling, his arms trembling about it, and his face pressed against the impersonal roughness of the bark. There was no wind, but the tree swayed back and forth and his body with it.

Then, as abruptly as light goes on when a switch is thrown, the noise vanished. Utter silence, and at last he was strong enough to let go his grip on the tree and stand erect again, to look about to get his bearings.

One tree was like another, and for a moment he thought he'd have to stay here until daylight. Then he remembered that the sound of the surf would give him his directions. He listened hard and heard it, faint and far away.

And another sound—one that he had never heard before—faint, also, but seeming to come from his right and quite near.

He looked that way, and there was a patch of opening in the trees above. The grass was waving strangly in that area of moonlight. It moved, although there was no breeze to move it. And there was an almost sudden *edge*, beyond which the blades thinned out quickly to barrenness.

And the sound—it was like the sound of the surf, but it was continuous. It was more like the rustle of dry leaves, but there were no dry leaves to rustle.

Mr. Smith took a step toward the sound and looked down. More grass bent, and fell, and vanished, even as he looked. Beyond the moving edge of devastation was a brown floor of the moving bodies of *kifs*.

Row after row, orderly rank after orderly rank, marching resistlessly onward. Billions of *kifs*, an army of *kifs*, eating their way across the night.

Fascinated, he stared down at them. There was no danger, for their progress was slow. He retreated a step to keep beyond their front rank. The sound, then, was the sound of chewing.

He could see one edge of the column, and it was a neat, orderly edge. And there was discipline, for the ones on the outside were larger than those in the center.

He retreated another step—and then, quite suddenly, his body was afire in several spreading places. The vanguard. Ahead of the rank that ate away the grass.

His boots were brown with *kifs*.

Screaming with pain, he whirled about and ran, beat-

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ing with his hands at the burning spots on his body. He ran head-on into a tree, bruising his face horribly, and the night was scarlet with pain and shooting fire.

But he staggered on, almost blindly, running, writhing, tearing off his clothes as he ran.

This, then, was *pain*. There was a shrill screaming in his ears that must have been the sound of his own voice.

When he could no longer run, he crawled. Naked, now, and with only a few *kifs* still clinging to him. And the blind tangent of his flight had taken him well out of the path of the advancing army.

But stark fear and the memory of unendurable pain drove him on. His knees raw now, he could no longer crawl. But he got himself erect again on trembling legs, and staggered on. Catching hold of a tree and pushing himself away from it to catch the next.

Falling, rising, falling again. His throat raw from the screaming invective of his hate. Bushes and the rough bark of trees tore his flesh.

Into the village compound just before dawn, staggered a man, a naked terrestrial. He looked about with dull eyes that seemed to see nothing and understand nothing.

The females and young ran before him, even the males retreated.

He stood there, swaying, and the incredulous eyes of the natives widened as they saw the condition of his body, and the blankness of his eyes.

When he made no hostile move, they came closer again, formed a wondering, chattering circle about him, these Venusian humanoids. Some ran to bring the chief and the chief's son, who knew everything.

The mad, naked human opened his lips as though he were going to speak, but instead, he fell. He fell, as a dead man falls. But when they turned him over in the dust, they saw that his chest still rose and fell in labored breathing.

And then came Alwa, the aged chieftan, and Nrana, his son. Alwa gave quick, excited orders. Two of the men carried Mr. Smith into the chief's hut, and the wives of the chief and the chief's son took over the Earthling's care, and rubbed him with a soothing and healing salve.

But for days and nights he lay without moving and without speaking or opening his eyes, and they did not know whether he would live or die.

Then, at last, he opened his eyes. And he talked, although they could make out nothing of the things he said.

Nrana came and listened, for Nrana of all of them spoke and understood best the Earthling's language, for he

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had been the special protege of the Terran missionary who had lived with them for a while.

Nrana listened, but he shook his head. "The words," he said, "the words are of the Terran tongue, but I make nothing of them. His mind is not well."

The aged Alwa said, "Aie. Stay beside him. Perhaps as his body heals, his words will be beautiful words as were the words of the Father-of-Us who, in the Terran tongue, taught us of the gods and their good."

So they cared for him well, and his wounds healed, and the day came when he opened his eyes and saw the handsome blue-complexioned face of Nrana sitting there beside him, and Nrana said softly, "Good day, Mr. Man of Earth. You feel better, no?"

There was no answer, and the deep-sunken eyes of the man on the sleeping mat stared, glared at him. Nrana could see that those eyes were not yet sane, but he saw, too, that the madness in them was not the same that it had been. Nrana did not know the words for delirium and paranoia, but he could distinguish between them.

No longer was the Earthling a raving maniac, and Nrana made a very common error, an error more civilized beings than he have often made. He thought the paranoia was an improvement over the wider madness. He talked on, hoping the Earthling would talk too, and he did not recognize the danger of his silence.

"We welcome you, Earthling," he said, "and hope that you will live among us, as did the Father-of-Us, Mr. Gerhardt. He taught us to worship the true gods of the high heavens. Jehovah, and Jesus and their prophets the men from the skies. He taught us to pray and to love our enemies."

And Nrana shook his head sadly, "But many of our tribe have gone back to the older gods, the cruel gods. They say there has been great strife among the outsiders, and no more remain upon all of Venus. My father, Alwa, and I are glad another one has come. You will be able to help those of us who have gone back. You can teach us love and kindliness."

The eyes of the dictator closed. Nrana did not know whether or not he slept, but Nrana stood up quietly to leave the hut. In the doorway, he turned and said, "We pray for you."

And then, joyously, he ran out of the village to seek the others, who were gathering bela-berries for the feast of the fourth event.

When, with several of them, he returned to the village, the Earthling was gone. The hut was empty.

Outside the compound they

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found, at last, the trail of his passing. They followed and it led to a stream and along the stream until they came to the tabu of the green pool, and could go no farther.

"He went downstream," said Alwa gravely. "He sought the sea and the beach. He was well then, in his mind, for he knew that all streams go to the sea."

"Perhaps he had a ship-of-the-sky there at the beach," Nrana said worriedly. "All Earthlings come from the sky. The Father-of-Us told us that."

"Perhaps he will come back to us," said Alwa. His old eyes misted.

Mr. Smith was coming back all right, and sooner than they had dared to hope. As soon in fact, as he could make the trip to the shack and return. He came back dressed in clothing very different from the garb the other white man had worn. Shining leather boots and the uniform of the Galactic Guard, and a wide leather belt with a holster for his needle gun.

But the gun was in his hand when, at dusk, he strode into the compound.

He said, "I am Number One, the Lord of all the Solar System, and your ruler. Who was chief among you?"

Alwa had been in his hut, but he heard the words and came out. He understood the words, but not their meaning. He said, "Earthling, we welcome you back. I am the chief."

"You were the chief. Now you will serve me. I am the chief."

Alwa's old eyes were bewildered at the strangeness of this. He said. "I will serve you, yes. All of us. But it is not fitting that an Earthling should be chief among—"

The whisper of the needle gun. Alwa's wrinkled hands went to his scrawny neck where, just off the center, was a sudden tiny pin prick of a hole. A faint trickle of red coursed over the dark blue of his skin. The old man's knees gave way under him as the rage of the poisoned needle dart struck him, and he fell. Others started toward him.

"Back," said Mr. Smith. "Let him die slowly that you may all see what happens to—"

But one of the chief's wives, one who did not understand the speech of Earth, was already lifting Alwa's head. The needle gun whispered again, and she fell forward across him.

"I am Number One," said Mr. Smith, "and Lord of all the planets. All who oppose me, die by—"

And then, suddenly all of them were running toward him. His finger pressed the trigger and four of them died before the avalanche of

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their bodies bore him down and overwhelmed him. Nrana had been first in that rush, and Nrana died.

The others tied the Earthling up and threw him into one of the huts. And then, while the women began wailing for the dead, the men made council.

They elected Kallana chief and he stood before them and said, "The Father-of-Us, the Mister Gerhardt, deceived us." There was fear and worry in his voice and apprehension on his blue face. "If this be indeed the Lord of whom he told us—"

"He is not a god," said another. "He is an Earthling, but there have been such before on Venus, many many of them who came long and long ago from the skies. Now they are all dead, killed in strife among themselves. It is well. This last one is one of them, but he is mad."

And they talked long and the dusk grew into night while they talked of what they must do. The gleam of firelight upon their bodies, and the waiting drummer.

The problem was difficult. To harm one who was mad was tabu. If he was really a god, it would be worse. Thunder and lightning from the sky would destroy the village. Yet they dared not release him. Even if they took the evil weapon-that-whispered-its-death and buried it, he might find other ways to harm them. He might have another where he had gone for the first.

Yes, it was a difficult problem for them, but the eldest and wisest of them, one M'Ganne, gave them at last the answer.

"O Kallana," he said, "Let us give him to the *kifs*. If *they* harm him—" and old M'Ganne grinned a toothless, mirthless grin "—it would be their doing and not ours."

Kallana shuddered. "It is the most horrible of all deaths. And if he is a god—"

"If he is a god, they will not harm him. If he is mad and not a god, we will not have harmed him. It harms not a man to tie him to a tree."

Kallana considered well, for the safety of his people was at stake. Considering, he remembered how Alwa and Nrana had died.

He said, "It is right."

The waiting drummer began the rhythm of the council-end, and those of the men who were young and fleet lighted torches in the fire and went out into the forest to seek the *kifs*, who were still in their season of marching.

And after a while, having found what they sought, they returned.

They took the Earthling out with them, then, and tied him to a tree. They left him there, and they left the gag over his lips because they did

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not wish to hear his screams when the *kifs* came.

The cloth of the gag would be eaten, too, but by that time, there would be no flesh under it from which a scream might come.

They left him, and went back to the compound, and the drums took up the rhythm of propitiation to the gods for what they had done. For they had, they knew, cut very close to the corner of a tabu—but the provocation had been great and they hoped they would not be punished.

All night the drums would throb.

The man tied to the tree struggled with his bonds, but they were strong and his writhings made the knots but tighten.

His eyes became accustomed to the darkness.

He tried to shout, "I am Number One, Lord of—"

And then, because he could not shout and because he could not loosen himself, there came a rift in his madness. He remembered who he was, and all the old hatreds and bitterness welled up in him.

He remembered, too, what had happened in the compound, and wondered why the Venusian natives had not killed him. Why, instead, they had tied him here alone in the darkness of the jungle.

Afar, he heard the throbbing of the drums, and they were like the beating of the heart of night, and there was a louder, nearer sound that was the pulse of blood in his ears as the fear came to him.

The fear that he knew why they had tied him here. The horrible, gibbering fear that, for the last time, an army marched against him.

He had time to savour that fear to the uttermost, to have it become a creeping certainty that crawled into the black corners of his soul as would the soldiers of the coming army crawl into his ears and nostrils while others would eat away his eyelids to get at the eyes behind them.

And then, and only then, did he hear the sound that was like the rustle of dry leaves, in a dank, black jungle where there were no dry leaves to rustle nor breeze to rustle them.

Horribly, Number One, the last of the dictators, did not go mad again; not exactly, but he laughed, and laughed and laughed.....

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second sight

by BASIL WELLS

Then his hand caught an arm and he exerted his full strength. The entire arm tore away from its shoulder . . .

HIS FINGERS moved over the modest packet of bills the invisible rockhound had handed to him. He smiled through the eternal night that was his own personal hell. Duggan's Hades.

"Thanks, Pete," he said gratefully. "Here, have a box of Conmos."

His sensitized fingers found the cigars, handed over a box, and he heard the nervous scuff of the other's shoes.

"This eight thousand means I can see again—for a while at least. Take 'em! It's little enough."

"Look, Duggan. I get eight hundred for selling you the ticket on the breakthrough time. Keep the cigars. You need the dough."

Feet pounded, thumping into swift inaudibility along the 10th Level's yielding walkway. His fingers caressed the crisp notes that his lucky guess on the 80th Level's tunnel juncture had won for him, plus the ten dollars, that this meager business could ill afford, it had cost to join the rockhounds' pool...

But now he was free. His

Basil Wells, who lives in Pennsylvania, writes that he has been doing research concerning the keelboat age prior to and following the War of 1812 on the "locally famous section of portage-keelboat-rafting stream from Waterford down to Pittsburgh", turning from this to this grimmer future.

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own man. He was released from the calculated economies of his wife. Janith knew to within a few dollars what his newsstand on the 10th Level should make. He had never been able to save the necessary thousand dollar deposit, and ten dollars an hour, that a rented super mech cost. And she would never listen to his pleas that he must see again—if only for an hour...

"Waste ten or twenty dollars for nothing," she would storm. "We have all your hospital bills to pay. I need new clothes. Your stock in the stands is too small."

What she left unspoken was the fact that she must secretly have hated his engineering career in the deep levels under Appalachia, and that she was dedicated to preventing his possible return...

After three years of blindness, under his wife's firm dominance, Duggan felt only hate for her. With this sudden fortune he could be independent. He could divorce her. He could rent a super mech—even return to work in the ever-deepening levels of Appalachia City!

First of all he must see again.

He closed up the news-and cigar stand. With his cane's sensitive radar button pulsating beneath his fingers he hurried along the walkway toward the nearest super mech showroom. It was less than three blocks...

"Be sure that all the contacts are against the skull and neck," the salesman was saying, his voice muffled by the mentrol hood covering Duggan's head and shoulders.

"Of course." Duggan's impatience made his voice shrill. "I've used mentrols before when inspecting caveins and such."

"Very well, sir." The man's voice was relieved. Probably he hated his job as much as Duggan hated his cigars and news.

Duggan tripped the switches and heard the building hum of power. An odd sort of vibration that his mind told him was purely emotional, seemed to be permeating his whole body.

Abruptly the transition was complete. He was no longer lying on the padded bench beneath the mentrol hood. He was standing erect, conscious of the retaining clamps that held him upright.

He gulped a deep draught of air into the artifical lungs that did not need oxygen and his mechanical pulse quickened.

His eyes slitted open, drinking in by degrees the mirrored mentrol booth and the pallid, fat, little man sitting beside his hooded body. He stepped out of the clamps, his sharpened senses aware of softness, and hard-

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ness, and scent, and color that human weakness so often blurs.

This super mech that was linked directly with his brain by twin mentrols was tall, chunky and gray of eye and hair. In a general way it was a duplicate of his own body, but there was no facial resemblance.

"How do you like it, sir?" The fat smile was empty, almost apologetic. "We have younger, more handsome models..."

"Well enough." Duggan started donning the clothing that he had removed. "I'll want the mech for five, possibly ten, hours."

"I'll make out the slip for ten hours, sir. We'll refund any balance due you. But after ten hours..."

"I know. You must report the mech missing. But with my body here you can't lose."

The salesman smiled enigmatically. "We *have*," he said.

Duggan shrugged. He was impatient to be outside, feasting his starved vision on the stores and parks of the various upper levels. He might even take a lift to the Outside. It had been fifteen years ago, while their youngest son was a baby, that they had taken a weekend motor trip to the great scar that had been Manhattan. He remembered the vastness and the rawness of the uncontrolled atmosphere. It had been beautiful but also a bit terrifying. It was a ten years delayed honeymoon...

And now Merle was in the rocket corps and Janith and he were like strangers.

Duggan zippered shut his gray-checked jacket and left the booth. He walked slowly, savoring every picture of the crowded passenger strips beyond the walkway, and of the fairy spans of moving walkways crossing the travel strips. The soft glow of the Level's ceiling, fifty feet above, illuminated the double rows of apartment and store fronts.

It was good to see again.

Every twelfth section of the Level was a park. The greenery was fresher and brighter than he remembered; the tree boles and the branches were marvels of grace and strength. He strolled along the paths, impatient to be moving on, but aching with the emerald beauty around him...

He took the lifts to the upper levels. He rode the swiftest walkways and travel strips, his eyes drinking in the long-hidden sights. From an observation dome he looked out over the wooded mountain slopes of Outside, and saw the telltale ridging of rock and earth that marked the scores of hidden vehicular tubes linking Appalachia with its sister cities of Ondack and Smoky.

His five hours stretched into seven, and then, eight.

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Slowly a determination to keep these eyes, at whatever cost, was building within him. Always before he had agreed when Janith decided. He had been so dependent on her those first terrible weeks. But now, with this money from the breakthrough pool, he could rent a super mech—live as a man should live!

Duggan left the employment booth on the 20th Level, a badge on his jacket and a half-grin on his full super mech's lips.

On the records he was now Al Duggan, a second cousin from Montana. He knew that nothing in the world could bring Al further east than Ozarka. Just to be safe, however, he decided to drop Al a line to explain.

As far as his wife was concerned Merle Duggan was gone. Dead and buried. She could get a divorce if she wanted and marry that poddy, pink-skulled boss of hers at the advertising agency...

"Five hundred a month," Duggan told himself. "Two-fifty for the rental, fifty for insurance—maybe fifty or so for spare parts—that leaves about a hunded and fifty for me."

He was starting at the bottom as a rock hog, a mucker, a clean-up man in the newly opened 80th Level. And his wages were the minimum union scale.

He took the lift down to the 79th Level, flashed his new badge at the guards, and took the gritty freight lift to the lowest level of the sprawling metropolis...

"You Gaines Short?" he asked the lanky man bent over the littered desk in the rough plastic bubble that served as an office.

Sharp black eyes studied him—noted the bright new olive badge, and the creased, obviously new, coveralls.

"You're the new rock hog?"

"Yes sir. Al Duggan."

"Any experience?"

"Montana—m i n i n g. Had some engineering. Worked in Ozarka on tunnels."

The lank man nodded, expressionless.

"You'll hog for a while. Later we'll see... Any relation to the Duggan we lost a couple of years back?"

"We're cousins."

"Tough he couldn't see his way clear to try again." Short's lips thinned. "He may snap out of it yet... We could use a few more like him."

"I—I'll talk with him," promised Duggan.

He fought back the words that wanted to pour out. W h e t h e r it was a strange sense of loyalty to his wife, or a stubborn sort of pride, he could not bring himself to speak ill of her.

"A super mech is not so bad, Duggan." Short flexed a skinny arm. "I've worn this

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one since a rock slide crushed my back."

"Yes sir," Duggan agreed.

Short scribbled on a form, handed it to Duggan.

"Take this down to Ted Rusche, he's the short, dark fellow bossing the rock hogs. He'll see you're issued your tools."

Duggan nodded and turned away.

In the Super Mech hostel, on the 79th Level, Duggan shared a compartment of six sleeping and mentrol plates. All of the others were rockhounds, and three of them worked in his own cleanup gang. His immediate pusher, Ted Rusche, was a legless, dark and hairy man, much like his working super mech. Waide and Myham, the first tall and once-handsome, and the latter, bony and scarred, were both paralytics.

Duggan's share of the attendants' salary amounted to another fifty dollars monthly. He was not growing too wealthy!

"And how do you like it after three weeks, Al?" Rusche demanded from where he balanced on the cushioned sleeping plate.

Duggan stretched cramped limbs and turned his sightless face toward Rusche's voice.

"Seems good to be working again, Ted," he said.

"This's your last day with us, Al. Orders from Short. He's transferring you. Office work I guess, or maybe he's making you a foreman."

Rusche's voice was curious. "He musta found out something about you, Al. S'funny but you look awful familiar to me too. And you know more about tunnels than you let on. How about leveling with a guy?"

"Not now." Duggan was thinking of the other listening men. "After we've cleaned-up and eaten. See you in the park outside the hostel."

"Right."

Duggan's thoughts were muddled. Fingerprints probably; at every super mech hostel all guests were printed and taped, and possibly through his similar name. Short must have been suspicious from the first. And if he had come to the hostel to see Duggan's mentrol-hooded face, while Duggan worked, his identification must have been sure.

Short knew that he was Merle Duggan, and before too long Janith, and all his friends—if he had any left now—would know he had been in hiding here.

He hurried to eat and get ready for another period under the mentrol's hooded probes.

Less than half an hour later he strode out of the hostel, his super mech gleaming

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and clean and his jacket and shorts newly pressed. He met Rusche in the park and they headed for the lift to the upper level.

Enroute to the 10th Level he explained.

"I thought you looked like somebody I should know." Rusche scrubbed at his pseudo beard's coarseness. "Accident left you sort of psychoed, huh? So you was scared of the Levels? Had to try coming back with a false name?"

Duggan gulped. It made a believable sort of yarn. He hadn't taken time to concoct a story... Why not?

"Something like that. I guess I was badly shook, Ted."

"So now you go back to being engineer at a thousand or so, and I'm still a rock hog." Rusche shrugged. "Less headaches anyhow."

They stepped off the lift at the 10th Level and took the high speed strip toward the business section. Duggan had it in his mind to see Janith and tell her she had failed —that he was his own man again. She would be at the office. He would tell her off, and leave. And then he'd show Rusche some of the high spots of the low number levels of Appalachia.

The darkness came about them swiftly. To Duggan it was like a return to the nightmare of sightlessness. Under their feet the racing strip faltered and stalled. They were thrown off their feet and sprawled on the fiber-ribbed squares of the checkerboarded way's surface.

"What is it?" demanded Rusche.

He fought back the panic. This was not true blindness.

"Criminals. They set off a few dozen 'midnight' bombs and try to rob banks or stores. We get these attacks quite often."

"Last long?"

"Emergency ventilation will clear it out in a couple of minutes. And the Squads will have them in half an hour. They never get very far."

They sat close together, to wait. From the walkways and stalled strips shrieks and frightened cries sounded. The sounds seemed to increase from behind them.

"This's my first time above the Twentieth Level," Rusche confided. "Thirty-five years and I never saw the Outside. I don't think I like it up this high."

"It will be over in a little while, Ted. Probably just a group of teen-agers looking for thrills." He laughed drily. "They'll end up with blanked memories and new faces like those who tried before them."

"Listen," muttered Rusche.

In the lightlessness, and above the wailing of the terrified people about them, they could hear the scuff of

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running feet. They were coming closer at a swift pace. In a moment the runners would collide with them!

Duggan's years of blindness had given him the ability to judge and gauge distance from sound. At the proper instant he pounced, his hands clamping around a body, and a second body crashed into the leader. They went down in a tangle.

He heard Rusche shouting and fists battering and the tinkle of metal or crystal on metal. He was fighting desperately, his super mech's strength overtaxed. The unseen man's hands tore at his neck and shoulder, ripping away the synthetic flesh and baring the complex framework beneath.

Then his hand caught an arm and he exerted the full strength of his mech power, until now carefully subdued. The entire arm tore away from its shoulder. And yet the wounded man continued to attack.

It was only then that he realized this must be a super mech. The criminals must have stolen one or two super mechs and were using them in this robbery.

He was ruthless, then. He wrenched away the other arm. He battered at the unseen torso. The feet of the desperate mech smashed at his knees and thighs, staggering him. Then he bore the armless torso of the mech backward and fell upon it.

The mech went limp, its mentrols blanked by the distant criminal who controlled it.

Duggan came to his feet, listening for the sound of battle between Rusche and his captive. It came from his right, faintly. About ten feet distant, he judged it. And now the emergency vents were clearing the darkness from the travel strips. Twilight faded and vision replaced it.

Rusche was sitting astride a prone body, and even as Duggan reached his side the struggling criminal's arms and legs went limp. Rusche grunted and started to stand.

"A super mech!" he said. He rubbed thoughtfully at his disarranged nose and cheeks, smoothing them again into their normal contours. "What about yours?"

"The same."

"Here's their loot, anyhow," Rusche said, holding up a small gray plastine bag.

"Drop it, Ted. We better fade out of here before the Squads arrive, too. They might think we're—"

"Not on your life, Al. We should get a reward. Pics on the newswires and tapes."

Duggan shrugged and smoothed at his own neck and face. Four red-uniformed men, their heads hidden by ovoid gas helmets, came hissing toward them along the

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travel strip. They rode single-wheeled cycles and their rapid fire expoders were trained on them.

"Careful now, Ted. Let me do the talking. They like to use paralysis needles and question later."

"But—"

"I've lived up here."

The unicycles braked to a halt.

"Step over here, slow," ordered one of the squadmen.

Duggan obeyed, careful to keep his arms rigid. Of course paralysis needles would cause this mech body no damage, but why make trouble? They *had* more destructive weapons.

"Ran into us," he said mildly. "We figured something wrong—honest men would be standing where they were. We stopped them."

The four members of the Squad were inspecting the damage.

"I guess you did," one of them said, admiringly. "You must be super mechs too?"

"That's right. I'm Duggan, Al—Merle Duggan, and this is my friend, Ted Rusche. We work on the 80th Level—rockhounds."

"Duggan?" The man's voice was suddenly strained. "Maybe you're not so clear as you pretend. A woman got in the way by accident, supposedly, of their getaway from the bank. Her name was Duggan too."

Duggan started forward, remembered the ugly expoder muzzles and backed away.

"Was her name Janith?" he demanded.

"Radio report didn't say. Contact them, Joe," he told one of the other faceless men.

"Couldn't be you hired these two to kill her and pretend the robbery?" he inquired.

"Of course not."

One of the Squad mumbled something. Duggan's interregator dropped his weapon's muzzle.

"Woman twisted her ankle trying to get out of the way, and fell. Received a cut on her temple and is being taken to the hospital. Accidental all right."

"But her name."

"Janith."

Duggan felt a strange mingling of anger and of tenderness. The anger was directed toward the criminals.

"Could I go to her now? Rusche can fill you in on details."

"It's not—oh, all right. Regulations aren't too strict on these Levels. She your sister?"

"Wife." He turned to Rusche.

"See you at the lift in about an hour," he said and headed for the advertising agency where Janith was employed.

"We haven't been informed as to her whereabouts

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yet, Mr. Duggan," the receptionist at Duffey's offices said coldly.

Duggan glared down into the carefully pretty face, the solar lamp tan and the knife-smoothed wrinkles.

"Now see here, Blanche," he said, and spluttered impotently.

"See here yourself, Merle Duggan," the woman spat back sharply. "After all! You come running back just because she's hurt. Why didn't you come back like this a year ago?"

"I was with her a year ago."

"That wasn't you. You didn't have guts enough to rent a super mech and go back to your old job." The woman laughed. "Janith tried to insult and needle you into being a man again. And you just crawled."

"That's a lie," Duggan cried. "I begged her to let me go back. She wouldn't listen."

"That's what you say now. You don't want to remember. I know. I was here all the time. Many a time Janith has come to the office, crying, and told me how hopeless it seemed."

"You're—you're inventing all this Blanche," he accused.

"I wish I were. Remember, Merle. Think. Be honest with yourself." Blanche put her nervous, blue-veined hand on his arm. A detached part of his brain noted how bony and brittle her hand was.

"She's loved you all these years, Merle." The tiny hand dug into his jacket sleeve. "To make you well again she risked losing your love—and she lost."

Blanche must be all of fifty, perhaps fifty-five, the analytical portion of his mind noted. Old maidish in many ways, despite her five ex-husbands; yet so sentimental—

"It's all part of her scheme. Pretend to be the patient, long-suffering wife and then secretly forbid me to go back to the deep levels again! You don't know!"

The woman's tired eyes sparkled green. Her little fist cracked against his chest. She turned half away from him.

"But I do know. I sat up with you many nights, while Janith got a few hours of rest. You were like a baby, slobbering and whimpering in your sleep. The days were worse. You were drunk and shouting and weeping. To you blindness was the end."

Merle gulped. He could remember nothing of the sort. Only the accident and awakening in the hospital to darkness... But there was a strange blankness, a hiatus in his memories, that ended with his hated job in the cigar stand. He could not recall his first day there or—

Could Blanche be telling the truth?

"You—spiteful old hag!"

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he shouted at her, and rushed out of the offices.

His feet pounded at the yielding softness of the walkway. The hospital was less than two blocks distant—no need to take a travel strip—and he needed the automatic motion of walking to steady his thoughts.

The forgotten months. Four months, or was it five months, ago, he was in the cigar and news stand. That was the day when an old acquaintance from the lower levels sold him the chance on the 80th Level breakthrough.

That night he had begged Janith to let him rent a super mech. And she had scoffed at his wastefulness. Yet, now that he remembered it again, there had been a wistful note of hope in her voice.

Could she have been trying to fan his faint desire for sight into something more powerful and consuming—so he would become again the engineering Duggan he had been?

He had surrendered then, as he did many times afterward. Sullenly, yes, but he had surrendered. Perhaps she knew he was not ready for sight. When he refused to obey her, when he insisted on hiring a super mech—then, perhaps, she would know the cure was complete.

But that was only theory. He remembered her clearly expressed hatred for the mucking, lower-level life of a rockhound. Always his hatred for her grew as she spoke of his work...

She had never expressed herself in that way before the accident. She had gone with him on many exploratory trips into the caverns that the lower levels of Appalachia cu across. And she had enjoyed the experience—he was sure of that.

Remember! Think back. Back before the cigars and papers. Back to the days and months after the accident. It hurt to think. His temples, here on the mentrol-hooded sleeping plate, were pounding irregularly...

Huddling in a bed, knees drawn up and head tucked in, trying to gain somehow the safety that an infant once knew. Janith's voice, soft and understanding, and the acid of panic that set his lips to mumbling meaningless jargon...

Why had Janith not sent him to the medical centers for mental clearing and re-education as was done with all cases of psychoed abnormals? The answer was with him. She loved him as he was, Merle Duggan—not as a new personality in her husband's body.

Artificially amnesia automatically dissolves all marriage partnerships. She had not wanted that. Instead she had three years of hell...

Striking out at emptiness, his fists contacting soft flesh,

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and the pained cry, swiftly suppressed, of Janith. His voice, cursing and high-pitched, as he fought the straps that now were restraining his sightless body. The bite of a needle and gradual dissolution of feeling...

Memory was coming reluctantly back to Duggan. This was not the self-imagined visionings of an abused helpless man. These memories were true. He had fought against all mental therapy and turned from those who loved him.

Now the hospital entrance was before him. He paused for a moment and then went inside. The automatic hush of the door shutting out the muted street sounds was all-too familiar.

"Mrs. Janith Duggan," he told the crisply white woman at the desk.

"Room 212, second floor."

"Thank you."

He used the steps in preference to the lift. He needed more time to think—would he ever find enough time?

Undoubtedly, now, Janith's love for him was dead. His desertion of her must have finished the dissolution of their marriage. It had been cowardly—he should have faced her and declared what he was going to do and what she could do.

These past weeks, working with the rock hogs, had been invaluable. They had restored something of his self esteem.

The second floor. Pastel bare walls and soft voices. The odors. 208 and opposite, 209. A wheelchair, propelled by a timidly smiling white-haired woman. He nodded automatically.

210. What could he say to her? That he was sorry she was hurt and that he was such a fool? And then back to the super mech hostel and the five other cripples who shared the room?

212. The door ajar. A private room. He was glad of that. The headache was more violent now—there was a bitter taste in his mouth as his super mech entered the room.

She was alone, looking tiny and helpless on the high bed. To him, after three years, she was more beautiful than he remembered, even though the pure whiteness of her once-graying hair startled him.

"Janith," he said uncertainly.

She turned her head, curiosity in her expression, and then understanding came. There was no mistaking the warmth and welcome that came into her eyes. She held out her arms.

"Duggy," she commanded, "come here."

And he knew then, without ever being told, that his revolt and flight had all been part of the therapy, and Janith had known all the time where he had been...

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—continued from Back Cover

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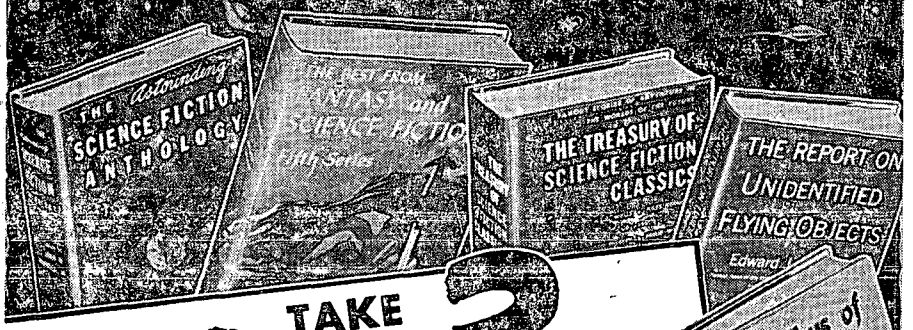
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